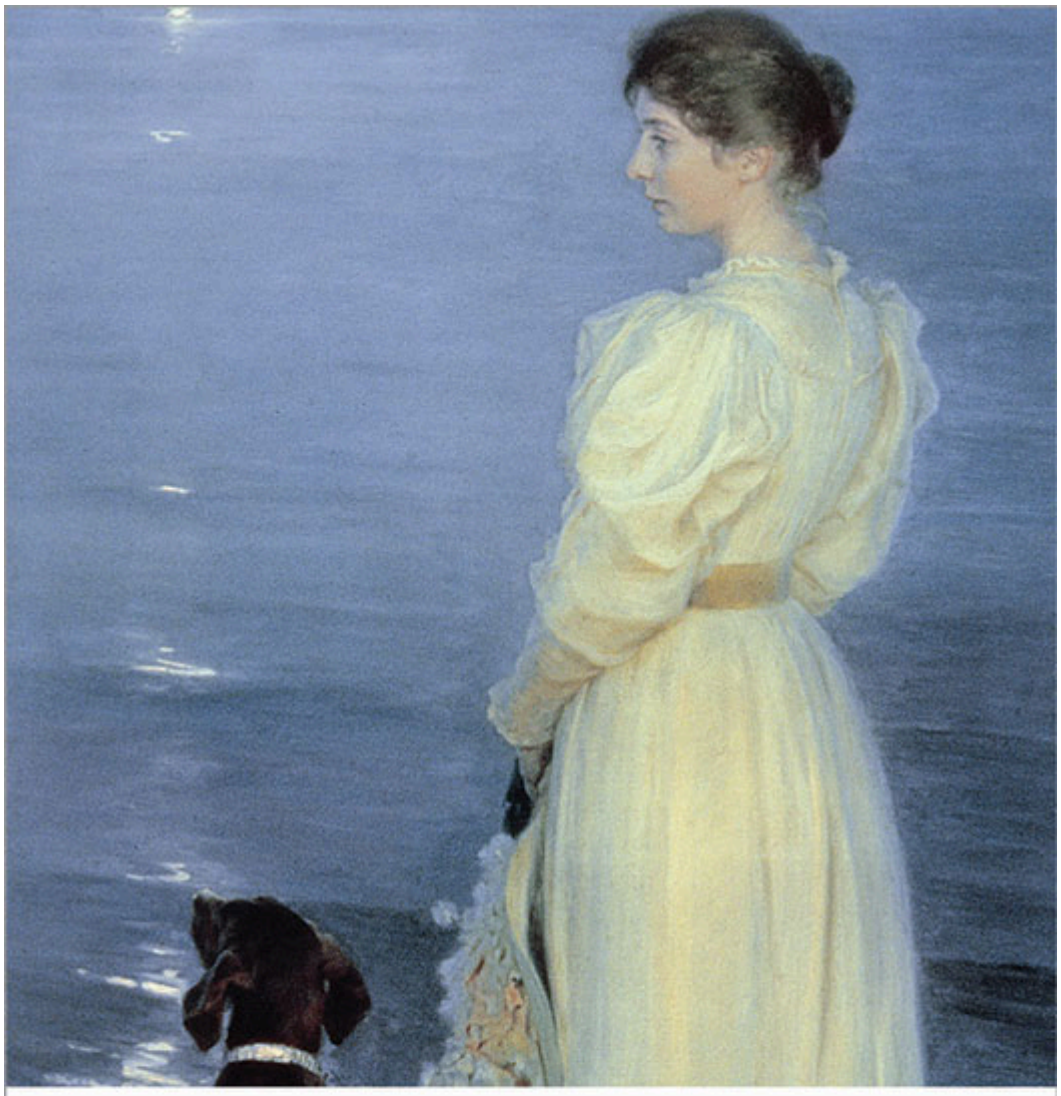
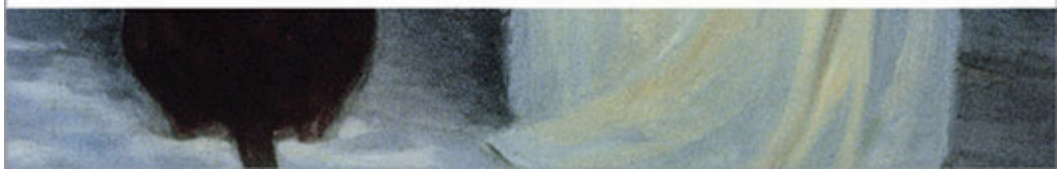


Theodor Fontane

Effi Briest

A new translation by Mike Mitchell

OXFORD WORLD'S CLASSICS



OXFORD WORLD'S CLASSICS

EFFI BRIEST

THEODOR FONTANE was born in 1819 in North Germany, of a family which had originally emigrated to Prussia in the eighteenth century from France to avoid persecution as Protestants. Brought up in various towns around Berlin, Fontane left school early and became a pharmacist, like his father. His first publications were mostly ballads. In 1849 he became a full-time writer, which meant working as a journalist. From 1854 to 1859 he was based in London as an official correspondent for the Prussian government. In the following decade he wrote books about the Prussian wars against Denmark, Austria, and France. He also wrote a multi-volume travel book about the history and traditions of Prussia, *Wanderings Through the March of Brandenburg* (1862–92). He was nearly sixty when his first novel, a historical narrative inspired by Scott and Thackeray, appeared as *Before the Storm: A Novel from the Winter 1812–13* (1878). Thereafter he produced a series of novels, mostly set in the present and for the most part in Berlin, giving humorous, often critical, portrayals of middle- and upper-class society, and focusing especially on the problems of marriage. *Effi Briest* appeared in 1895. His last and in some ways most ambitious novel, *The Stechlin*, relying on conversation rather than action to give a broad picture of modern Germany in the context of Germany's changing place in the wider world, appeared a few months after Fontane's death in 1898. Popular in his own day, he is now recognized as Germany's leading contributor to the tradition of nineteenth-century realist fiction.

MIKE MITCHELL taught at the universities of Reading and Stirling before becoming a full-time translator. He is the co-author of *Harrap's German Grammar* and the translator of numerous works of German fiction. He has translated Kafka's *The Trial* for Oxford World's Classics.

RITCHIE ROBERTSON is Taylor Professor of German at the University of Oxford and a Fellow of Queen's College. He is the author of several works on German literature and has translated Kafka's *The Man who Disappeared* for Oxford World's Classics, as well as editing four other volumes of Kafka's fiction for the series, and two works by Sigmund Freud.

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THEODOR FONTANE

Effi Briest

Translated by

MIKE MITCHELL

With an Introduction and Notes by

RITCHIE ROBERTSON

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EFFI BRIEST

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Introduction

Readers who do not wish to learn details of the plot will prefer to treat the Introduction as an Afterword.

Of the many novelists writing in nineteenth-century Germany, Theodor Fontane is not only, by common consent, the greatest, but also the most cosmopolitan. His ancestors were Huguenots, Protestants from Nîmes, who fled from France after Louis XIV denied them toleration by revoking the Edict of Nantes in 1685. Five thousand Huguenots, skilled craftsmen with their families, were welcomed to Berlin by Friedrich I, the far-sighted ruler of Prussia, and formed a colony whose church still stands on the Gendarmenmarkt in the centre of Berlin. They included the Fontaine family, who presently changed the spelling of their name and modified its pronunciation. The novelist pronounced his name Fóntan (two syllables, with the stress on the first), though nowadays the name is generally pronounced as three syllables with the stress on the second.

Although he was of French descent through both his father and his mother, Theodor Fontane felt a particular affinity to the English language and British culture. His first visit to England was a fortnight's stay in the summer of 1844. At this time Fontane, who had left school at the age of fifteen, was following his father's profession as a pharmacist. He was also writing poetry, especially ballads, and was admitted in 1844 to a Berlin literary society called the Tunnel over the Spree (the name of one of the rivers running through the city); this society, of which he remained an active member till 1855, brought him into contact with many prominent figures, including the important writers Theodor Storm and Paul Heyse (winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1910) and the painter Adolph Menzel. In 1849 he decided to become a full-time writer. This meant in practice scraping a living as a journalist, often writing for newspapers whose conservative politics Fontane disliked. But it had the advantage that he was sometimes sent abroad. From April to September 1852 he was in London as a correspondent for a Berlin paper, and from 1855 to 1859 he was there as an official correspondent for the government. His residence in Britain gave rise to two travel books, *From England* and *Beyond the Tweed*, the latter being an account of a tour through Scotland as far as Inverness that he undertook in the summer of 1858; both books are full of anecdotes associated with the stately homes, battlefields, and other historic sites that Fontane visited, and he tells them with the circumstantial detail, the gusto, and the friendly rapport with the reader that would later reappear in his novels. He also immersed himself in British realist fiction. He was already an admirer of Walter Scott, whose novels had a Europe-wide vogue, and his own first novel, *Before the Storm* (1878), is a work of historical fiction, inspired by Scott, dealing with the Prussian campaign against occupying French troops in the winter of 1812–13. During his stay in Britain, however, Fontane also discovered Thackeray, and was particularly enthusiastic about *Vanity Fair*. Thackeray is the principal model behind the series of social novels, beginning with *L'Adultera* (*The Woman Taken in Adultery*, 1882), and ranging in tone from gentle humour and satire to understated tragedy, that have earned Fontane a reputation as Germany's 'European' novelist.

Fontane's novels are most often set in late nineteenth-century Berlin. Various parts of the north German countryside, however, provide the setting for much of Fontane's fiction. *Effi Briest* begins and ends in the Havelland, west of Berlin, and Chapters 6 through 22 take place in a remote area of the Baltic coast. Other novels range further: *Unwiederbringlich* (*No Way Back*, 1891) is set in Denmark, *Graf Petöfy* (1884) in Vienna and Hungary, and much of *Quitt* (*Quits*, 1890) among German emigrants in the United States (though America, which Fontane had never visited, appears in this novel as a strange place inhabited solely by Germans).[1] Many especially of his later novels, including *Effi Briest*, contain significant references not only to America but to Asia and Africa. During the twenty years, 1878–98, in which Fontane's fiction appeared, Germany was intent on catching up with the older European powers by establishing its own colonies across the globe. Increasingly, and above all in his last novel, *Der Stechlin* (*The Stechlin*, 1898, named after a lake in northern Prussia), Fontane explores the connections between Germany and the rest of a world which is already becoming globally interconnected.

For the greater part of his life, however, Fontane was a citizen not of Germany but of Prussia. The state of Germany came into being only in 1871, when King Wilhelm I of Prussia was proclaimed the sovereign of the revived German Empire. Prussia was the dominant territory among those that were combined to form the Empire, and to appreciate Fontane's novels it is essential to know something of the Prussian history that is referred to in detail in the text and is vividly present to all the characters.

From Prussia to Germany

The historic core of Prussia is the region of Brandenburg in north-eastern Germany, with its capital at Berlin. In the early Middle Ages German colonists conquered this region from its original Slav inhabitants, known collectively as Wends, and settled it. Its status as the March of Brandenburg, indicating that it formed the

eastern frontier of the Holy Roman Empire, is conventionally dated from 1157, when the town of Brandenburg was conquered by the margrave Albert the Bear.[2] Fontane used the German term 'Mark Brandenburg' for his series of travelogues, *Wanderungen durch die Mark Brandenburg* (*Wanderings Through the March of Brandenburg*, 1862–92), in which he recounted the traditions of the region. In 1417 Friedrich Hohenzollern bought Brandenburg outright from the then Emperor Sigismund. It cannot have seemed a desirable property, because Brandenburg was then, and long afterwards, a desolate, largely infertile region, sometimes sandy and sometimes swampy ('the sands of the March' became proverbial). A vigorous programme of land-reclamation and drainage, carried on in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was required to create cultivable land.[3] The few naturally fertile districts included the Havelland, west of Berlin, where the Briest family have their estate at Hohen-Cremmen; Effi's father is in effect a farmer on a large scale, and his prosperity, never great, depends on the varying income from his crops. However, the ownership of Brandenburg included the status of Elector. The ruler of Brandenburg was one of the seven potentates who could vote on candidates for the office of Holy Roman Emperor. Although from the thirteenth century until the formal dissolution of the Empire in 1806 the position of Emperor was effectively hereditary in the House of Habsburg, the role of Elector conferred significant international standing.[4]

The Hohenzollern dynasty survived till 1918. One of its weaker representatives was the Elector Georg Wilhelm (reigned 1619–40), during whose reign, as Fontane tells us in the first sentence of *Effi Briest*, the Briest family came to live at Hohen-Cremmen. Georg Wilhelm was eclipsed by his successor, Friedrich Wilhelm (reigned 1640–88), who acquired the sobriquet 'the Great Elector'. He owed this name especially to his victory over a larger Swedish army at the Battle of Fehrbellin in 1675, where, as Effi proudly mentions in Chapter 8, a member of the Briest family played an honourable part. But Friedrich Wilhelm also illustrated two characteristics of the Hohenzollerns which secured their stability. One was a selfless devotion to government. He was a hands-on, full-time ruler, who once said: 'I shall manage my responsibility as prince in the knowledge that it is the affair of the people and not mine personally.'[5] He thus anticipated the more famous statement by his descendant, the enlightened despot Friedrich II, better known as Frederick the Great (reigned 1740–86): 'The sovereign, far from being the absolute master of the people under his dominion, is nothing else but their first servant.'[6] The other successful quality of the Hohenzollerns was their longevity. The Great Elector ruled for forty-eight years, Friedrich II for forty-six, his nephew Friedrich Wilhelm III for forty-three years (1797–1840), and the latter's son, Friedrich Wilhelm IV, for twenty-one years (1840–61). By this time the dynasty had replaced the title of Elector with that of King, which now carried more international prestige. The first King of Prussia was Friedrich, who had ruled as Elector from 1688 to 1701 and was King from 1701 till 1713.

Prussia, though a relatively poor country, soon established itself as a major international player. Friedrich II gained a personal and national reputation, first by enlarging his country through the illegal seizure and incorporation of the rich territory of Silesia, and then through leading his nation to victory in the highly perilous Seven Years War (1756–63). Once Prussia had built up a reputation as a major military state, the shock was all the greater when, after the French Revolution and the advent of Napoleon, Prussia was decisively defeated in the battles of Jena and Auerstedt in 1806. The French occupation of Prussia brought about the birth of German nationalism. It also provided material for Fontane's first novel, *Before the Storm*, which culminates in an—unsuccessful—attempt by local landowners to capture the French stronghold at Frankfurt an der Oder in early 1813.

In the nineteenth century Fontane observed Prussian militarism with fascinated revulsion. As a young man he held radically liberal political views. He belonged to a society called the Herwegh-Club, ostensibly devoted to literature but in fact to promoting the revolutionary political ideals of the poet Georg Herwegh, after whom it was named. When revolution broke out in Berlin in March 1848, Fontane was not the bemused onlooker he depicts in his later autobiographical writings but an engaged participant. After the failure of the revolutions he found it painful to have to make a living by writing for conservative newspapers under the reactionary government of Otto von Manteuffel.

In the 1860s the Prussian minister-president and foreign minister, Otto von Bismarck, guided Prussia towards a dominant position in a united Germany via a series of wars. The first occasion was provided by the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein, which were claimed both by the Danish crown and by a German, Prince Friedrich of Augustenburg, while Bismarck hoped to annex both to Prussia. War with Denmark broke out in 1864. At Bismarck's insistence, Prussian forces stormed the Danish entrenchments at Düppel (Dybbøl) with heavy loss of life, and, after further successes, ended the war rapidly and victoriously. The twin duchies were occupied jointly by Prussia and Austria, but a dispute over their status led to the Austro-Prussian War, fought in northern Bohemia over seven weeks in the summer of 1866. The Prussians were victorious in the battle that is known to German historians as Königgrätz (after a Bohemian fortress) and to Austrian historians as Sadowa (after the nearby town). It was clear that any unification of Germany would no longer involve Austria. Prussia was far the largest state, and the unchallenged kingpin, in the North German Confederation, but the south German states outside the Confederation still resisted proposals for German unification.

Bismarck saw that unification could be assisted by a threat from France. One soon came. France and Prussia were supporting rival claimants to the throne of Spain. Just when their differences were close to being reconciled, the French foreign minister unwisely demanded that Prussia should promise never again to support

the candidate whom France disliked. King Wilhelm I of Prussia, who was on holiday at the resort of Bad Ems, drafted a polite refusal, but Bismarck got hold of the King's telegram and, by omitting a few words, made it seem like an insulting rebuff. Feeling their national honour offended, the French government declared war. It was a fatal mistake, leading to Prussia's crushing victory over France at Sedan on 1–2 September 1870, to the siege of Paris, the Paris Commune—events all vividly described in Émile Zola's great novel *La Débâcle* (1892)—and to the proclamation of the German Empire at Versailles in January 1871.

These events deeply interested Fontane, who as a journalist visited the battlefields, wrote books about all three campaigns, and in France was taken prisoner, held in various prisons for two months, and released thanks to intervention by Bismarck. They are also imprinted both on the text of *Effi Briest* and on the consciousness of the characters. The garden at Hohen-Cremmen contains a pyramid commemorating the Battle of Waterloo. Innstetten and Crampas have both fought in the Franco-Prussian War. An important conversation between Effi and her mother is interrupted by the celebration of Sedan Day on 1 September (Ch. 4). In Berlin, Effi and Innstetten go to see a panoramic picture of the storming of St Privat, one of the high points of the war (Ch. 6). The couple's child is born on 3 July, the anniversary of the Battle of Königgrätz, and christened, less auspiciously, on 15 August, the birthday of Napoleon Bonaparte. In their Berlin flat they have patriotic pictures illustrating victories in the Dano-Prussian and Austro-Prussian wars. Effi takes a holiday at Ems, the spa from which Wilhelm I sent the fateful Ems Telegram. Alone in Berlin, Effi lives in a boarding-house in the Königgrätzerstrasse with a view of Schinkel's monument on the Kreuzberg commemorating the dead of the Wars of Liberation (1813–14).

However, Fontane's portrayal of Imperial Germany is anything but triumphalist. Innstetten provides the focus for a critical picture of society. Although he is said to come from an ancient family, Innstetten is contrasted with the rural aristocrats, known as 'Junkers', such as the Borcke, Grasenabb, and Güldenklee families near Kessin, who live on their estates and hold ultra-conservative views; Baron von Güldenklee of Papenhagen even thinks that God was on Prussia's side in the war against France. We learn that Innstetten, having found army life uncongenial, entered the civil service and worked fanatically. He has attained the position of 'Landrat' or local administrator. He is thinking of standing as a candidate for the Reichstag, in which case Effi, as a trophy wife, will be a useful asset. He enjoys the favour of Bismarck, who is by now Chancellor of Germany, and is often summoned by the latter to the hunting-lodge at Varzin which Bismarck received from a grateful nation after the victory over Austria in 1866. As it takes three hours in winter to reach Varzin from Kessin, by road and rail, these invitations are highly inconvenient. On being transferred to the ministry in Berlin, Innstetten goes to the Chancellery to sign the book of congratulations to Bismarck on his birthday. Although Bismarck never appears in person in the novel, he is an ominous off-stage presence. He inadvertently weakens the marriage between Innstetten and Effi because his invitations to Varzin (in which Effi is never included, perhaps because Innstetten, we are told, is a favourite of Bismarck's wife) require Innstetten to leave Effi on her own, feeling bored, lonely, and frightened.[7]

Despite the success of his career, Innstetten does not seem a happy man. His marriage to Effi, whose mother rejected him as a suitor twenty years earlier, is a rather unimaginative second attempt at a happiness which ultimately eludes him. On the very day when he receives news of his promotion, he tells his colleague Wüllersdorf how little such things mean to him. Fontane himself detested bureaucracy. His only experience of it, during his appointment as Secretary of the Royal Academy of Arts in Berlin, was so unpleasant that he resigned within three months, despite losing financial security and having to endure severe reproaches from his wife. He complains of the 'huge, tedious, and in my experience totally confused machinery that calls itself "the state" '.[8]

Innstetten's inner unease is manifested in his strange fascination with the supernatural.[9] He may have told ghost stories, as Crampas recalls, to impress his fellow soldiers, and he may cultivate the idea of living in a haunted house in Kessin to make himself seem special and to keep Effi under control, but he cannot control his own leaning towards superstition. When Effi's playfellows call her back, just after she and Innstetten have become engaged, he feels the incident is more than just chance (Ch. 3). He takes very seriously the discovery of the little picture of the Chinaman (Ch. 8), refuses to dismiss the idea of ghosts (Ch. 24), and later shares Effi's feelings of melancholy at the gloomy Lake Hertha (Ch. 24) and her sense that their house in Kessin is uncanny (Ch. 28). His love of Wagner is attributed by some people to his nervous disposition (an affliction shared by Effi, and characteristic of the period).[10] Others ascribe it to his sympathy with Wagner's anti-Semitism (Ch. 13). The narrator surmises that both are right.

Although we see no further evidence of Innstetten's anti-Semitism, we learn much about his distrust of Slavs. The inhabitants of the countryside round Kessin are Kashubs, a Slav people established in the region long before German settlers arrived. Since the Kashubs' territory is around Danzig (Gdańsk), in present-day Poland and a long way east of the Swinemünde on which Fontane partly based Kessin, we are to imagine a remote and somewhat precarious frontier area; Innstetten is rather like a colonial administrator governing an alien population.[11] The original inhabitants of northern Germany are often referred to as Wends (*Wenden*). Uvagla, near Kessin (adapted from the actual pre-Germanic place-name Pudagla), is said to be the site of a Wendish temple. On the island of Rügen Effi and Innstetten see the stones where the ancient Wends conducted human sacrifices. Here, as elsewhere in Fontane's novels, references to the ancient populations remind us that German rule is relatively recent and insecure, and also suggest an undercurrent of guilt at the violent conquests on

which Prussia was founded: in his *Wanderings Through the March of Brandenburg* Fontane is forthright about the frequent treachery and cruelty practised by the Germans against the Wends.[12]

More recently, Prussia had annexed a large portion of the former kingdom of Poland. Each of the three partitions of Poland, in 1772, 1793, and 1795, enlarged Prussian territory, especially the Second Partition which gave it the extensive province of Posen (Poznań). Poles are viewed with guilty unease. Speaking of Golchowski, landlord of the inn 'Prince Bismarck', Innstetten remarks that he is 'half Polish', and that Poles are good-looking but untrustworthy. Similarly, he describes Crampas as 'half Polish, you can't really rely on him, not in anything, least of all with women' (Ch. 18)—a judgement that is confirmed by events. Curiously, being 'half Polish' seems worse than being a pure-blooded Pole, perhaps because such unclassifiable people are felt to be alien infiltrators passing as 'normal' Germans.

This subliminal paranoia about minorities reflects the reality of the German Empire. The new state followed the policy of creating solidarity among its citizens by organized discrimination against out-groups.[13] Throughout the 1870s Bismarck directed a campaign, with strong support from liberals, against the political and educational influence of the Roman Catholic Church, which was seen, especially since the proclamation of Papal Infallibility in 1870, as an illiberal, reactionary, anti-intellectual institution and as a rival to the new state for the allegiance of German Catholics.[14] Against this background, Effi's kindness to the Catholic Roswitha, whom she befriends and saves from destitution, has to be seen as a natural and humane gesture that goes against official ideology. The attempt by the anarchist Karl Eduard Nobiling to assassinate the Emperor on 2 June 1878 (mentioned in Chapter 9) provided a pretext for the legal prohibition later that year of the Social Democratic Party, a ban which remained in force until 1890. Although anti-Semitism was never official policy under the Empire (at least until the First World War), considerable anti-Semitic activity was tolerated, while linguistic minorities such as the Danes in Schleswig-Holstein, the French in Alsace-Lorraine, and the Poles in the eastern Prussian territories were increasingly compelled to use German in schools and law-courts.

Fontane's many references to continents beyond Europe also intimate the position of Imperial Germany in a world of global interconnections. Kessin is an international port whose businessmen often act as consuls serving the interests of foreign powers. Its inhabitants are international. Besides natives of Scotland, Denmark, and Sweden, we hear of a retired captain who sailed with the Chinese river pirates of Vietnam. And as these pirates were also helping the Vietnamese to resist French invaders, we are reminded of the conquests made by European powers. Trying to catch up with Britain and France, Germany from the 1880s onwards acquired colonial territories by establishing protectorates in such regions as East Africa (now Tanzania), and so we hear about African rulers such as Mirambo and Mutesa. Innstetten half-jokingly advises Crampas to take service in the Turkish or Chinese armies (Ch. 15). He himself is rumoured (Ch. 21) to be leading a legation to Morocco, where Germany wanted to extend her influence. In a despairing mood, Innstetten later imagines emigrating to Africa to 'mingle with pitch-black fellows, who know nothing of civilized behaviour and honour' (Ch. 35).

If Europe is penetrating remote parts of the globe, they in turn are penetrating Europe. This is the context in which to see the mysterious figure of the Chinaman. Innstetten reluctantly tells Effi how a China merchant, Captain Thomsen, returned to Kessin with a Chinese servant, and how Thomsen's granddaughter, on the eve of her wedding to another captain, danced with the Chinaman and then vanished, never to be seen again. The Chinaman soon afterwards died and is buried among the dunes outside Kessin. This enigmatic story is somehow connected with the little picture of a Chinaman that Effi finds stuck to a chair in the upstairs room from which sinister noises come, and which also turns up after their move to Berlin. Fontane considered the motif of the Chinaman so important that he called it the pivot of the novel. He wrote to a sympathetic reviewer, the Swiss critic Joseph Victor Widmann: 'You are the first person to point to the haunted house and the Chinaman; I don't understand how one can overlook it, for first of all this ghost, or so I think at least, is interesting in its own right, and secondly, as you have emphasized, the matter is not there just for amusement but is a pivot for the entire story.'[15] The motif provides a focus for the uneasy relations between Germany and the extra-European world which pervade the novel.[16] China was important to German colonial policy. It provided a potential market for German industrial products, but it was also felt to be untrustworthy, and popular stereotypes represented all Chinese as sinister. In 1870 Bismarck authorized a naval expedition against Chinese pirates; in 1897 Germany annexed an area on the Chinese coast, Kiao-Chou, as a military base; and in 1900 the Emperor Wilhelm II sent German troops in to help suppress the Boxer Rebellion in Peking, adjuring them, in a notoriously bloodthirsty parting speech, to behave like Huns and to take no prisoners. The image of the 'yellow peril' is suggested in the many ominous appearances of the colour yellow: in the upper rooms of Innstetten's house, on the yellow sands where yellow flowers bloom, on the flag hanging from the hotel that Effi sees as she leaves Kessin, and earlier—most suggestively—on a yellow half-timbered house that Effi gazes at with unexplained attentiveness (Ch. 20); is this the place where she and Crampas have their illicit meetings? The motif of the Chinaman may be seen as the Empire striking back in a form of 'reverse colonialism', as when colonial peoples penetrate Britain in Victorian fiction—the Indians in Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868), the Andaman Islander in Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four* (1890), and the apparent references to Thuggee in Dickens's *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870).[17]

However, the motif of the Chinaman not only reminds us how far the novel is a critique of imperial Germany; it also focuses the question of power-relations, especially within marriage. For the Captain's granddaughter,

Nina, resembles Effi in being the subject of an arranged marriage. She escapes from it, nobody knows how or where. The triangle of Nina, her intended husband, and the Chinaman who may have been her lover corresponds to the triangle of Effi, Innstetten, and Crampas. And this invites us to look closely at *Effi Briest* as a novel of marriage.

Marriage

In setting a story of marital breakdown against the background of Prussian traditions and Imperial German society, Fontane drew on the actual, recent, and much-discussed case of the Ardennes.[18] Elisabeth von Plotho (1853–1952), known as Else, a gifted, charming, and high-spirited young woman from an aristocratic family in the Havelland, married in 1873 an officer, Armand Léon von Ardenne (1848–1919), who belonged to the Zieten Hussars and was stationed in the garrison town of Rathenow (details alluded to early in Fontane's novel). Ardenne was five years older than Else; like Innstetten, he served in the Franco-Prussian War, received the Iron Cross, and inherited the title of Baron. When stationed with his regiment at Düsseldorf in north-west Germany (a location offering much more diversion than the remote 'Kessin'), he worked so hard, not only at his regimental duties but at writing for the military press and composing a history of his regiment (published in 1874), that Else felt neglected. Unlike Effi, she had a large social circle, consisting partly of officers but also including the lawyer Emil Hartwich, a cultivated person and talented painter, who was unhappily married. Quite how the intimacy between Else and Hartwich developed is hard to say, but in 1886, two years after Ardenne's transfer to the Ministry of War in Berlin, he became suspicious and broke open a box which turned out to contain letters from Hartwich planning how he and Else should each divorce their partners and get married. Else confessed to the liaison. Ardenne challenged Hartwich to a duel, which took place on 27 November 1886. Hartwich was severely wounded and died four days later. The Ardennes got divorced; Ardenne, to Else's distress, received custody of the children. Like Innstetten, he was briefly imprisoned as a token punishment, but continued his career and reached the rank of lieutenant-general. Else von Ardenne devoted herself to charitable work. 'You may be interested to know', Fontane wrote to a friend, 'that the *real* Effi is still alive, as an excellent nurse in a large hospital. Innstetten, *in natura*, is about to become a general. I only made him abandon his military career so that the real persons should not be too obvious.'[19]

In turning this case into fiction, Fontane has made five obvious changes. First, he has increased the age difference from five to twenty-two years—Effi is sixteen when the novel begins, just before her seventeenth birthday, while Innstetten is thirty-eight; Fontane has also given much attention to how the marriage comes about.

To increase Effi's isolation, and make it more intelligible how she could fall for Crampas, Fontane has sent the newly married couple to 'Kessin' on the Baltic. For Effi, who has always lived near Berlin, Kessin feels like the back of beyond. It is closely based on Swinemünde, a town on the island of Usedom (now Świnoujście in Poland), where Fontane lived from 1827 to 1832, and which he had just described vividly in the first part of his autobiography, *My Childhood* (1894). But he has moved it to Hinterpommern (Farther Pomerania), a region which begins further east than Swinemünde, and the surrounding population are said to be Kashubs, who in fact lived around Danzig (Gdańsk). Świnoujście is nowadays a holiday resort with a fine bathing-beach and a promenade, whereas in Fontane's time, and in the novel, we must imagine a lonely coastal area covered with sand-dunes. Kessin too is a holiday resort, but the tourists come only in the summer; Effi arrives there in November, and her affair with Crampas takes place mostly in February, some fifteen months later, so we are to imagine Kessin as having the peculiar melancholy that afflicts a holiday resort outside the tourist season.

Fontane has left a gap of six years between the end of the affair and its discovery, so as to introduce the problem of 'Verjährung', or the statute of limitations. Is it necessary or right to punish an offence after the lapse of so much time?

Crampas is not a civilian lawyer, as Hartwich was, but an officer himself, and a minor noble, so that aristocratic and military society in particular comes under Fontane's microscope.

Finally, whereas Elisabeth von Plotho survived into old age, Effi dies, for reasons that are kept somewhat unclear.

Unlike the Ardennes' marriage, that between Effi and Innstetten is largely arranged by the bride's parents. That is not necessarily fatal to the marriage. As Fontane pointed out in a testy review of Ibsen's *Ghosts*, most marriages throughout history have been based on convenience, not love: 'It is my firm conviction that if, since the beginning of history, marriages had been based, not on convenience and considerations of advantage, but solely on love, the state of the world would not be a jot better than it is.'[20] In this case, however, the marriage has been planned, ostensibly for practical reasons—Innstetten, heading for a distinguished career, is an excellent match—but really for unacknowledged emotional reasons. Over twenty years ago Effi's mother Luise received a proposal from the young Innstetten, but rejected him and soon afterwards married Briest, who is twelve years her senior, and whom she now clearly finds irritating. By marrying Innstetten to Effi, she is making her daughter enact the emotional life that she wishes she had had. Innstetten, for his part, is trying to compensate for Luise's rejection by marrying her daughter. As Russell Berman astutely points out, this makes Innstetten himself into a

kind of ghost who belongs to Effi's past and now uncannily dominates her present.[21]

If we think about Innstetten's emotional history, we can see that there is more to him than a careerist. His emotional rejection twenty years before clearly inflicted a wound. It was to dull the pain that he plunged into his career. It is not surprising if now he treats Effi with some emotional reserve, nor if he involuntarily regards her somewhat like a daughter and assumes a sometimes excessively didactic manner towards her.[22] Near the end, Effi charges him with lacking genuine love. But his character has been shaped by Effi's mother's refusal to love him: 'Effi points to Innstetten, but the text points at Luise. Her daughter is dying because Innstetten would not love her, but his inability derives, so the text suggests, from an internalization of the denial he had experienced years ago at her hands.'[23]

Ironically, Innstetten is also a parallel figure to Luise von Briest. Both come to represent the internalized expectations of society which command one to act on principles and block the natural impulses of the heart. When Innstetten, having discovered Effi's unfaithfulness six years earlier, tells his colleague and confidant Wüllersdorf that the code of honour requires him to fight a duel on principle, he is clearly acting in bad faith. His conversation with Wüllersdorf, as John Walker has recently observed, is 'a study in self-deception'.[24] Innstetten may believe that Wüllersdorf has convinced him of the need to fight a duel with Crampas, but really he has confided in Wüllersdorf in order to render irrevocable a decision that he has already taken. His famous declaration, 'We're not just separate individuals, we're part of a whole, and we must always consider the whole, we're entirely dependent on it' (Ch. 27), is of course true insofar as we are social beings, but it becomes false in its final clause. Since he still loves Effi, feels no anger, yet is proposing to shoot Crampas in cold blood, he is entirely abandoning his own feelings and surrendering to a bloodless set of principles.[25] Luise von Briest acts similarly in refusing to accept her daughter back at Hohen-Cremmen, 'because we must nail our colours to the mast and show to all the world—I'm afraid I can't avoid the word—our condemnation of what you did' (Ch. 31).

What about Effi? Some commentators have been hard on her, treating her as an immature person who has thoughtlessly internalized the social norms with which she has been brought up. She does of course tell her girlfriends, with a spurious air of worldliness, 'Every man's the right one. Of course he has to belong to the nobility, have a position, and be presentable' (Ch. 2). But this remark can be interpreted more sympathetically as revealing not her shallowness, but her pardonable pride in being the first among her friends to become engaged, and her uneasy wish to reassure herself that she was right to accept the proposal.[26] And it is surely unjustified for J. P. Stern to assert that her 'experience of love remains immature', or John Walker that '[f]or most of the novel, she lacks any real sense of self'.[27] Rather, in the early phase of her marriage Effi looks for love, not just to have her social ambitions satisfied, and is disappointed by the lukewarm kindness she receives from Innstetten. Later, after their move to Berlin, they grow much closer, which makes the disruption of their marriage all the more distressing.

Effi is a fresh, lively, imaginative, playful, spontaneous person, thrust into a situation she can hardly cope with. Her charm is made clear in the delightful scene in which she wins the heart of the Kessin pharmacist Gieshübler (Ch. 8), and her genuine, active goodness is beyond doubt when she befriends the unfortunate Roswitha (Ch. 13). She embodies the natural humanity which was perhaps the supreme value in Fontane's eyes. 'The natural has appealed to me for a long time, it is the only thing that matters, the only thing that attracts me,' Fontane wrote in 1895, explaining why he created such heroines as Effi.[28] This natural feeling is shared by Effi's father, who unfortunately is mostly under his wife's thumb; by Roswitha, who stands by Effi when even her parents have rejected her; and by the faithful Newfoundland dog Rollo, who, at the end of the novel, is clearly about to die on Effi's grave.[29]

Such a natural being is bound to suffer under the restriction which the Prussian legal code imposed on married women. Dirk Mende provides a useful summary:

> In matters of joint concern the husband's decision is always final. The wife shares the man's residence, name, and social rank, is obliged to run the household, and without his permission may neither practise a profession of her own nor undertake any duties outside the home. The husband is entitled to open her letters. Physical violence against the wife … is not in itself any ground for complaint. In legal matters the husband represents the wife and is her legal guardian. The wife may not conduct a lawsuit without his agreement. The upbringing of the children is in the hands of the husband: daughters are freed from their father's authority only when they marry, unmarried ones only by his death. The father, who also controls the children's religious instruction, can remove a child from its mother's care as soon as it is four years old, can place it in an educational institution, and decide on its choice of profession.[30]

Hence, when Innstetten discovers that Effi was once unfaithful to him, all the rights are on his side, and there is not the slightest question of Effi's having custody of their child or even access to her. The laws, underpinned by moral condemnation, override all natural feelings.

In any case, natural feeling, in Fontane's view, was in danger of being extinguished by the rigid bureaucratization of Imperial German society. 'The more we are dominated by Assessors and Lieutenants of the Reserve, the worse things get,' he wrote to his friend Georg Friedlaender in 1896. 'The last remnant of natural feeling, which is always synonymous with poetic feeling, is disappearing.'[31] In the novel Fontane hints, more drastically, at an alliance between moral principle and sadistic cruelty, represented by the recurring image of sacrifice.[32] Effi recalls, in characteristically compassionate language, how 'poor, unfortunate women' in

Constantinople used to be drowned for infidelity. Crampas shows his cruel streak by recounting unpleasant stories, taken from narrative poems by Heine, about Spanish prisoners being sacrificed to the Aztec idol 'Vitzliputzli', and Pedro the Cruel of Spain killing his unfaithful wife's lover (Ch. 17). Roswitha, who has borne an illegitimate child, tells how she was almost killed by her father, a blacksmith, who attacked her with a red-hot iron. On Rügen, near the village of Crampas, Effi sees stones where the ancient Wends used to perform human sacrifices (Ch. 24), and the horrible image haunts her mind (Ch. 34). By now it is clear that Effi herself has been sacrificed to what her husband and Wüllersdorf explicitly call an 'idol': 'our cult of honour is worship of a false idol, but we have to submit as long as the idol rules' (Ch. 27).[33]

The details of Effi's sacrificial death are treated very discreetly. According to Dr Rummschüttel, a tendency to consumption, combined with a nervous disorder, is causing her to waste away. In late nineteenth-century fiction it is common for young women to die slowly but apparently painlessly from consumption or tuberculosis, as Milly Theale does in Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), but such diseases are understood to be partly emotional in origin.[34] They may express the frustration of passionate feelings, or, as Dr Rummschüttel implies in Effi's case, the denial of love.

Realism

Commenting on his own fiction, Fontane always distanced himself from the Naturalists who aimed to represent the grimmer sides of life factually and unsparingly. He insisted that literature needed an element of poetry and 'transfiguration' (*Verklärung*). 'If he does not transfigure what is ugly,' he wrote, 'the poet has failed.'[35] Consequently, Fontane set great store by the poetic element in his fiction and by what he called the 'thousand subtleties' with which he developed it.[36] Here the poetic takes the form of repeated motifs, such as the invitation 'Effi, come', given by Hertha at the end of Chapter 2, and unwittingly repeated in the telegram from Effi's parents ten years later (Ch. 34) summoning her back to Hohen-Cremmen. There is the recurrent image of flight, suggesting Effi's dangerous adventurousness: her daring antics on the swing, for which her mother rebukes her (Ch. 1), and the speed with which she and Crampas 'flew along' in their sleigh, just before the fateful moment (Ch. 19).[37] The implications of the colour yellow, and of the imagery of sacrifice, have already been noticed. Many more examples could be added.[38]

However, if one focuses too intently on these symbolic overtones, as was customary in Fontane criticism a few decades ago, one runs several risks. One may succumb to what Karl Guthke has called 'symbolizing paranoia' and perceive all sorts of symbolic patterns that are not present, or only accidentally and pointlessly present, in the text.[39] One also risks endowing genuine symbolic overtones with a life of their own which they do not really have. They are nuances which serve to deepen and qualify Fontane's narrative, but they are very much subordinate to the story about people interacting in a specific society. This tendency to elevate the imagery into an autonomous aspect of the novel is apparent in some of the most intelligent essays on *Effi Briest*. When Russell Berman speaks of a 'dual regime of realism and allegory', the word 'allegory' itself exaggerates the independence of the imagery.[40] And when Michael Minden argues that the poetic element works against the realistic element, by making a story of social impression into a ballad-like, fate-driven narrative and thus evading its socially critical implications, it is tempting to reply that he is artificially separating two elements of the novel and then complaining that they are separate.[41] The imagery of sacrifice, running from the early allusion to the drowning of women in Constantinople and culminating in the sacrifice of Effi to the 'idol' of social expectations, is prominent, but not independent of the narrative, and it is an instrument of social criticism, not an evasion of criticism.

Alongside the symbolic overtones, it is important to remember and appreciate the solid, material reality of the world that Fontane creates. It is a world full of objects that are presented as being first and foremost real, and symbolic (if at all) only afterwards, like the extensive description of the Briest house at Hohen-Cremmen with which the novel begins. It is also a world full of people whose lives go on independently of the main characters and often intersect with theirs only momentarily. The novel is heavily populated: if my counting is correct, forty-seven named characters appear in the action (to which one should in fairness add the Minister and his wife), while forty-one are mentioned but do not appear. This does not include characters who are now dead, like Captain Thomsen and the Chinaman, nor the undifferentiated noble families around Kessin—the Ahlemanns, the Jatzkows—on whom Innstetten and Effi are obliged to call. Some of these absent characters arouse an unsatisfied curiosity, like the three aunts whom Effi avoids visiting in Berlin, or 'Madelung, the decorator', who is said by Innstetten to be 'quite a character' but of whom we hear nothing more (Ch. 4). A few are briefly brought to life, such as the postman Böselager, whom the housemaid Afra despises for coming from Siegen, lacking 'dash', and not combing his hair (Ch. 30). Others, as Barbara Hardy points out, have tantalizingly untold stories attached to them.[42] What occurred to plunge Frau Kruse into her depression? Why did Wüllersdorf never marry? Is he like the unnamed dignitary at Effi's wedding who is now 'in his fourth "relationship" ' (Ch. 5)? By concisely suggesting a huge hinterland of interconnected lives, Fontane persuades us that his story is rooted in the real.

Despite occasional reservations, Fontane admired contemporary realist and Naturalist writers, notably Henrik

Ibsen, Émile Zola, and Gerhart Hauptmann. 'In the introduction of exact reporting,' he wrote in 1881, referring to Zola, 'I see an enormous literary advance, which has liberated us at a stroke from the dreary verbiage of past decades.'[43] He tried to get things right, though he admitted ruefully that it was impossible to be accurate about every detail.[44] To give the impression of exact reporting, Fontane appears to set the story of Effi Briest in a precise temporal and geographical framework. If we look more closely, however, we find some sleight of hand. Fontane clearly intended the novel to begin in 1878. Böcklin's painting *The Elysian Fields*, which Effi sees in Berlin, was displayed only in that year. When Innstetten and Effi visit the Kessin nobility in November and early December, people are talking about Nobiling, the anarchist who tried to assassinate the Emperor on 2 June 1878. The novel equally clearly ends in 1888, since the penultimate chapter mentions the recent death of the Emperor Friedrich III, which occurred on 15 June 1888. Within that framework, Effi's affair with Crampas takes place some eighteen months after her marriage, late in the Innstettens' second winter in Kessin; Innstetten finds out about it some six-and-a-half years later; and after their separation Effi lives on her own for three years. That makes eleven years, not ten. Just before the discovery of the letters, Johanna says that Effi will soon have her twenty-sixth birthday (Ch. 29); but as she was sixteen when the novel began, and had her seventeenth birthday shortly before her marriage, this would mean that the marriage lasted nine years and Effi then survived for a further three. Fontane has simply lost count. There are other, minor anomalies. In Berlin, before going to Kessin, Effi and Innstetten visit the St Privat Panorama, which opened only in 1881. At Kessin, in 1878, people plan to perform the comedy *War in Peace*, published in 1881. But one can hardly expect Fontane, or any novelist, to worry about such details. The inconsistent time-frame is a more serious matter—but again, one can hardly call it a defect, since it has seldom if ever been noticed.

Geography is similarly treated with a deceptive air of precision. Kessin is based on Swinemünde on the Baltic, where Fontane spent part of his childhood. He has also given Kessin some features that belong to Rostock, a city further west along the coast: the river Kessine broadens into a lake called the Breitling, and has a wood beside it called the Schnatermann, both of which are taken from the river Warnow which enters the sea near Rostock. However, Fontane always intended Kessin to be understood as much more easterly and hence as intimidatingly remote. To reach Kessin by train one travels via Stettin, a city in Farther Pomerania (now in Poland) and gets out at Klein-Tantow (an actual place which Fontane has moved). Close to Klein-Tantow station the road forks, one fork leading to Kessin, the other to Varzin, where Bismarck has his hunting-lodge. However, Varzin is also said to be an hour away by train (Ch. 9), so presumably some forty miles by road. The fork in the road expresses symbolic rather than actual geography: like Hercules choosing between virtue and pleasure, Innstetten has the alternatives of consolidating his marriage with Effi in Kessin or pursuing his career by attending on Bismarck in Varzin. Even the most solid-looking realism, therefore, is at a remove from documentary accuracy.

Nineteenth-century Germany, contrary to a lingering literary myth, produced a large body of realistic fiction.[45] However, Fontane, as the leading exponent of German realism, and *Effi Briest* as (in many people's opinion) his outstanding novel, need to be seen in a wider literary and historical setting. *Effi Briest* can be considered as a 'novel of adultery' alongside Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*.[46] While the comparison recognizes three great treatments of the subject, it also reminds us of the striking differences among them. The cynicism with which Flaubert regards Emma Bovary is remote from the emotional warmth associated with Effi, while *Anna Karenina* not only dwarfs most other novels, making comparison unfair, but is governed by an Old Testament moralism announced in its epigraph, 'Vengeance is mine: I will repay', which recalls the rigid social mores that condemn Effi.

We may bring *Effi Briest* into sharper focus if we compare it to German and non-German fiction of the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Barbara Everett briefly suggests a comparison with the novels of Henry James, from *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) to *The Wings of the Dove*, which 'all tell of the destruction of women as young and innocent as Effi, if more virginal and more deeply self-aware'.[47] Or we may think of the prolonged and undeserved sufferings undergone by Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles, in a novel subtitled 'A Pure Woman' (1891).[48] Nearer to home, in Austria, there are remarkable similarities between *Effi Briest* and the challenging novel *Unsühnbar* (*Inexpiable*, 1890) by the veteran novelist Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach (1830–1916), which also deals with the consequences of an arranged marriage in an aristocratic milieu. The heroine, pressured by her father into marriage with a worthy but unloved man, lets herself be seduced by a Crampas-like figure; she returns to her husband, grows to love him, and reveals her misdemeanour voluntarily after his death. And of course Fontane himself first treated the theme in *The Woman Taken in Adultery*, where the heroine, unable to stand her coarse-grained husband, is able, despite much suffering, to divorce him and enjoy a much happier second marriage.

At this period we find the theme of marriage treated in a serious manner. Previously marriage often marked the end-point of a novel or play. In the late nineteenth century it increasingly becomes the starting-point. We are shown fictional characters living through marriage, with its emotional ups and downs, its intermittent crises, and sometimes its definitive breakdown. If any one writer can be credited with bringing marriage into focus, it must be Ibsen. In his plays we see marriages being threatened, saved, or destroyed. In *A Doll's House* the heroine walks out of a suffocating conventional marriage; in *The Wild Duck* a marriage built on dubious foundations is held together by the wife's good sense, but ruined by the intervention of a head-in-the-clouds idealist; in *The Lady from the Sea* and *Little Eyolf* shaky marriages are finally saved.

However, there is one element in marriage that receives too little attention from Ibsen, namely children. The Allmers in *Little Eyolf* recover from the death of their nine-year-old son with implausible speed. Nora in *A Doll's House* abandons her children altogether. This was found so hard to accept that two versions were played alternately in Berlin, one with the original ending and one with a conciliatory end in which her husband leads Nora to the door of the children's bedroom, she faints, and agrees to stay at home. The latter is the so-called 'German ending' which Ibsen is said to have written at the behest of an actress, Hedwig Niemann-Raabe, who declared: 'I would never leave *my* children!'[49] Other writers not only acknowledged the importance of children but allowed them to express their own point of view. In *Anna Karenina* we see Anna's son Seryozha unhappy and puzzled about his mother. Henry James goes further, and in *What Maisie Knew* (1897) recounts a complicated history of divorce and remarriage from the perspective of a little girl of uncertain age.[50]

When Fontane addresses the themes of marriage and adultery, he gives due attention to children. In *The Woman Taken in Adultery* the heroine abandons not only her husband but her two daughters. This invites comparison with Ibsen's Nora.[51] However, she is desperate to see her children, but when she meets them again the elder, aged ten, harshly rebuffs her. This painful scene foreshadows the unfortunate reunion between Effi and Annie. We may notice that three years of being brought up only by her father have changed Annie: as a young child she is 'wild' like her mother, 'always dashing around like a whirlwind' (Ch. 26), but by the age of ten she is serious and almost preternaturally self-controlled. No doubt Innstetten has taught her to reject her mother, but, as Brian Holbeche argues, she has probably been brought up quite as much by the servant Johanna, who is secretly in love with Innstetten and hence jealous of Effi.[52]

The presence of Effi's child at a climactic moment of her story testifies to Fontane's realism. Fontane is not only a realist in writing a novel which can be assigned to the literary mode of realism, or the period of realism in literary history; he is also realistic in the related, everyday sense of facing without illusions the consequences that an action—marriage, adultery, or divorce—is bound to have. A marriage cannot end, for example, without some effect on the children. This 'realism of assessment', as J. P. Stern called it, strengthens our confidence in the realist writer.[53] We can feel that he or she is also realistic in knowing and displaying how the world actually works.

At the same time, Fontane is realistic in not overestimating how much he, or we, can know about other people. On a few occasions the omniscient narrator supplies an authoritative remark about one of the characters: about Effi's 'demanding' nature (Ch. 3), about Innstetten's enthusiasm for Wagner (Ch. 13), or about Crampas's casual betrayals (Ch. 17). Often, however, he suggests emotional layers in the characters about which we are left to speculate. When Effi and Crampas see each other for the last time, how do we interpret his being 'visibly moved', while Effi's look has 'something pleading about it' (Ch. 22) ? It is very rare for characters to bare their souls, as Effi does in her final outburst against society's icy virtue, or Innstetten when he declares, at the height of his professional success, 'I've made a mess of my life' (Ch. 35). Much of the time the characters are opaque. This applies especially to Annie. We can only guess what the little girl has gone through in turning from a lively child to an automaton-like product of discipline. And this opacity also forms part of the story of the Chinaman, which Fontane, as we have seen, called the pivot of the novel. We know next to nothing about him, and even less about the vanished Nina; but this opaque relationship haunts the novel, spreading its influence over the lives of Effi, Innstetten, Crampas, and eventually Annie. It is part of Fontane's achievement to find room in a realist setting for areas of emotional life that resist the realist's analysis.

[1] See Jeffrey L. Sammons, 'Representing America Sight Unseen: Comparative Observations on Spielhagen, Raabe and Fontane', in Dirk Göttsche and Florian Krobb (eds.), *Wilhelm Raabe: Global Themes—International Perspectives* (London: Legenda, 2009), 87–99.

[2] Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change 950–1350* (London: Penguin, 1994), 34.

[3] This story is vividly told by David Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape, and the Making of Modern Germany* (London: Cape, 2006).

[4] For the history of Prussia, I have drawn heavily on Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600–1917* (London: Allen Lane, 2006).

[5] Quoted in Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 41.

[6] Friedrich of Prussia, *The Refutation of Machiavelli's 'Prince' or Anti-Machiavel*, trans. and ed. Paul Sonnino (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1981), 34.

[7] On the fascinated ambivalence with which Fontane regarded Bismarck, see Gordon A. Craig, *Theodor Fontane: Literature and History in the Bismarck Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 116–17.

[8] Letter to Mathilde von Rohr, 30 Nov. 1876, quoted in Hans-Heinrich Reuter, *Fontane* (Berlin: Verlag der Nation, 1968), 532.

[9] On Innstetten's and other characters' unease, and its implications, see Erika Swales, 'Private Mythologies and Public Unease: On Fontane's *Effi Briest*', *Modern Language Review*, 75 (1980), 114–23.

[10] Cf. Effi's nervous trembling when she sees Innstetten (Ch. 2), her 'nervous tic' (Ch. 21), and the 'nervous disorder' detected by Dr Rummschüttel (Ch. 34). See Elaine Showalter, *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture* (London:

Picador, 1997).

[11] The contradictions around the location of Kessin are examined by Mirosław Ossowski, 'Fragwürdige Identität? Zur national-territorialen Bestimmung der Figuren aus dem deutsch-slawischen Kulturgrenzraum in Fontanes Spätwerk', in Hanna Delf von Wolzogen (ed.), *Theodor Fontane: Am Ende des Jahrhunderts*, 3 vols. (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2000), i. 255–67 (at 257–9).

[12] Fontane, *Wanderungen durch die Mark Brandenburg*, ed. Walter Keitel and Helmuth Nürnberger, 3 vols., 2nd edn. (Munich: Hanser, 1977), ii. 25–6.

[13] See Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *The German Empire 1871–1918*, trans. Kim Traynor (Leamington Spa: Berg, 1985), 102–13.

[14] See Michael B. Gross, *The War Against Catholicism: Liberalism and the Anti-Catholic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2004).

[15] Letter to Widmann, 19 Nov. 1895, quoted in Fontane, *Romane, Erzählungen, Gedichte*, ed. Walter Keitel, 6 vols. (Munich: Hanser, 1962), iv. 706.

[16] See Peter Utz, 'Effi Briest, der Chinese und der Imperialismus', *Zeitschrift fur deutsche Philologie*, 103 (1984), 212–25; Judith Ryan, 'The Chinese Ghost: Colonialism and Subaltern Speech in Fontane's *Effi Briest*', in William Collins Donahue and Scott Denham (eds.), *History and Literature: Essays in Honor of Karl S. Guthke* (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 2000), 327–40.

[17] See Stephen D. Arata, 'The Occidental Tourist: *Dracula* and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization', *Victorian Studies*, 33 (1990), 621–45; Ritchie Robertson, 'Jesuits, Jews, and Thugs: Myths of Conspiracy and Infiltration from Dickens to Thomas Mann', in Rüdiger Görner and Angus Nicholls (eds.), *In the Embrace of the Swan: Anglo-German Mythologies in Literature, the Visual Arts and Cultural Theory* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 126–46.

[18] This material was made known by Hans Werner Seiffert, 'Fontanes *Effi Briest* und Spielhagens *Zum Zeitvertreib*—Zeugnisse und Materialien', in Seiffert (ed.), *Studien zur neueren deutschen Literatur* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1964), 255–300. Fontane's treatment of it is examined by Jean A. Leventhal, 'Fact into Fiction: *Effi Briest* and the Ardenne Case', *Colloquia Germanica*, 24 (1991), 181–93.

[19] Letter to Clara Kühnast, 27 Oct. 1895, in Fontane, *Romane, Erzählungen, Gedichte*, iv. 704.

[20] 'Noch einmal Ibsen und seine "Gespenster" ' (1887), in Fontane, *Aufsätze, Kritiken, Erinnerungen*, ed. Walter Keitel and others, 4 vols. (Munich: Hanser, 1969), ii. 712.

[21] Russell A. Berman, '*Effi Briest* and the End of Realism', in Todd Kontje (ed.), *A Companion to German Realism* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2002), 339–64 (at 356).

[22] See the sensitive analysis of Innstetten by Brian Holbeche, 'Innstetten's "Geschichte mit Entsagung" and its Significance in Fontane's *Effi Briest*', *German Life and Letters*, 41 (1987), 21–32.

[23] Berman, '*Effi Briest* and the End of Realism', 356. Cf. Valerie D. Greenberg, 'The Resistance of Effi Briest: An (Un)told Tale', *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 103 (1988), 770–82 (esp. 777–8).

[24] John Walker, *The Truth of Realism: A Reassessment of the German Novel 1830–1900* (London: Legenda, 2011), 126.

[25] Among several studies of Innstetten's motivation in recent decades, one of the most searching is by a philosopher, and has been largely overlooked by literary critics: Julia Annas, 'Personal Love and Kantian Ethics in *Effi Briest*', *Philosophy and Literature*, 8 (1984), 15–31.

[26] See Charlotte Woodford, 'Fontane, *Effi Briest*', in Peter Hutchinson (ed.), *Landmarks in the German Novel (I)* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), 83–98 (at 86).

[27] J. P. Stern, *Re-interpretations: Seven Studies in Nineteenth-Century German Literature* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1964), 318; Walker, *The Truth of Realism*, 137.

[28] Letter to Colmar Grünhagen, 10 Oct. 1895, quoted in *Romane, Erzählungen, Gedichte*, iv. 703.

[29] See Rolf Zuberbühler, *'Ja Luise, die Kreatur.' Zur Bedeutung der Neufundländer in Fontanes Romanen* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1991). One might not have thought that a whole book could be written about Newfoundland in Fontane, but Zuberbühler has done so most illuminatingly. I am grateful to the librarian of Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, and to Dr Mary MacRobert, for providing me with a copy.

[30] Dirk Mende, 'Frauenleben. Bemerkungen zu Fontanes *L'Adultera* nebst Exkursen zu *Cécile* und *Effi Briest*', in Hugo Aust (ed.), *Fontane aus heutiger Sicht* (Munich: Nymphenburger Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1980), 183–213 (at 184–5).

[31] Fontane, letter of 22 Mar. 1896, in *Briefe an Georg Friedlaender*, ed. Kurt Schreinert (Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1954), 295.

[32] See Alan Bance, *Theodor Fontane: The Major Novels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 66–7; Jennifer Cizik Marshall, *Betrothal, Violence, and the 'Beloved Sacrifice' in Nineteenth-Century German Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 217–36.

[33] Cf. Fontane's letter of 3 Oct. 1893 to Friedlaender: 'there are only 6 idols in Prussia and the chief idol, the Vitzliputzli of Prussian worship, is the lieutenant, the officer of the reserve' (*Briefe an Friedlaender*, 236). Earlier in the letter Fontane lists five powers in Prussia: 'money, nobility, officer, assessor, professor' (235).

[34] Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (published with *Aids and its Metaphors*, London: Penguin, 1991), 21–36. See also Anna Richards, *The Wasting Heroine in German Fiction by Women 1770–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), where *Effi Briest* is discussed on pp. 81–5.

[35] Review of Hauptmann, *Vor Sonnenaufgang* (1889), in *Aufsätze, Kritiken, Erinnerungen*, ii. 820.

[36] Letter to Emil Dominik, 14 July 1887, in *Romane, Erzählungen, Gedichte*, ii. 913, referring specifically to *Irrungen Wirrungen* (*No Way Back*).

[37] See Peter Demetz, 'Symbolische Motive: Flug und Flocke', in his *Formen des Realismus: Theodor Fontane* (Munich: Hanser, 1964), 204–16.

[38] See Reinhard H. Thum, 'Symbol, Motif and Leitmotif in Fontane's *Effi Briest*', *Germanic Review*, 54 (1979), 115–24.

[39] Karl S. Guthke, 'Fontanes "Finessen". Kunst oder Künstelei?', *Jahrbuch der Deutschen Schiller-Gesellschaft*, 26 (1982), 235–61 (at 237).

[40] Berman, '*Effi Briest* and the End of Realism', 344.

[41] Michael Minden, 'Realism versus Poetry: Theodor Fontane, *Effi Briest*', in David Midgley (ed.), *The German Novel in the Twentieth Century: Beyond Realism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), 18–29.

[42] Barbara Hardy, 'Tellers and Listeners in *Effi Briest*', in Patricia Howe and Helen Chambers (eds.), *Theodor Fontane and the European Context* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, Ga.: Rodopi, 2001), 119–35 (at 119).

[43] Review of Kielland's *Arbeiter*, 1881, in *Aufsätze, Kritiken, Erinnerungen*, i. 527–32 (at 528).

[44] See Fontane's letter to Emil Schiff, 15 Feb. 1888, about the mistakes in *Irrungen Wirrungen*: *Romane, Erzählungen, Gedichte*, ii. 919–20.

[45] See Jeffrey L. Sammons, 'The Nineteenth-Century German Novel', in Clayton Koelb and Eric Downing (eds.), *German Literature of the Nineteenth Century, 1832–1899*, The Camden House History of German Literature, 9 (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2005), 183–206.

[46] See J. P. Stern, '*Effi Briest: Madame Bovary: Anna Karenina*', *Modern Language Review*, 52 (1957), 363–75, substantially reprinted in his *Re-interpretations*, ch. 7. A much wider range of comparisons appears in Bill Overton, *The Novel of Female Adultery: Love and Gender in Continental European Fiction, 1830–1900* (London: Macmillan, 1996), which includes a good discussion of Fontane (pp. 167–86).

[47] Barbara Everett, 'Night Air: *Effi Briest* and other Novels by Fontane', in Howe and Chambers (eds.), *Theodor Fontane and the European Context*, 85–94 (at 86).

[48] This comparison is suggested by Greenberg, 'The Resistance of Effi Briest', 770.

[49] Michael Meyer, *Ibsen* (Stroud: Sutton, 2004), 331.

[50] On Maisie's age, see Sally Shuttleworth, *The Mind of the Child: Child Development in Literature, Science, and Medicine, 1840–1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 330. Shuttleworth's detailed account of how Maisie is introduced prematurely to a corrupt adult world (pp. 325–34) suggests many parallels with *Effi Briest*, although Maisie is an observer and Effi a participant.

[51] Made e.g. by Overton, *The Novel of Female Adultery*, 170.

[52] Holbeche, 'Innstetten's "Geschichte mit Entsagung" ', 29.

[53] J. P. Stern, *On Realism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 140.

Note on the Text

FONTANE wrote *Effi Briest* between 1891 and 1893. It was serialized in the journal *Deutsche Rundschau* between October 1894 and March 1895 and published in book form by F. Fontane & Co., Berlin, in October 1895. This text forms the basis for the present translation. The novel was first translated into English in 1914 by William A. Cooper in an abridged edition as part of a twenty-volume series of German Classics published by the German Publication Society in New York. It has been filmed several times, including a 1974 version directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder and starring Hanna Schygulla as Effi.

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A Chronology of Theodor Fontane

1819 (30 December) Theodor Fontane born at Neuruppin in northern Prussia, son of the pharmacist Louis Henri Fontane (1791–1867) and Emilie Fontane, née Labry (1797–1869).

1827 The Fontane family moves to Swinemünde on the Baltic coast (the original of Kessin; now Świnoujście in Poland).

1836 Fontane begins his apprenticeship as a pharmacist in Berlin. From then till 1849 he works for pharmacists in various towns, taking his professional exams in 1847.

1840 The ultra-conservative Friedrich Wilhelm IV becomes King of Prussia.

1844 Joins the literary club 'Der Tunnel über dem Spree' ('The Tunnel over the Spree', named after one of the rivers at Berlin). Writes ballads, especially on events from Prussian history; (May–June) pays his first visit to England.

1848 Revolutions in Paris, Berlin, Vienna, and elsewhere. Fontane takes part in the Berlin revolution in March.

1849 Becomes a freelance writer, working for various, often conservative, newspapers.

1850 Marries Emilie Rouanet-Kummer (1824–1902).

1851 Birth of eldest son, George (1851–87).

1852 (April–September) Lives in London as newspaper correspondent.

1854 Publishes his first prose work, *A Summer in London*.

1855 Moves to London as correspondent on British affairs for the Prussian government led by the prime minister Otto von Manteuffel. His family joins him in 1857.

1856 Birth of second son, Theodor (1856–1933).

1858 Journey to Scotland. The fall of the Manteuffel ministry deprives Fontane of a major source of income. He scrapes a living from scattered journalism.

1859 Settles permanently in Berlin.

1860 Birth of daughter, Martha, known as Mete (1860–1917). Publishes travel books about England and Scotland.

1861 Wilhelm I becomes King of Prussia.

1862 Bismarck becomes prime minister of Prussia. Fontane begins publishing his series of historical travelogues, *Wanderings Through the March of Brandenburg* (5 vols.; the last appears in 1892).

1864 Birth of youngest son, Friedrich (1864–1941). War between Prussia and Denmark over Schleswig-Holstein. Prussian troops capture the Danish fortifications at Düppel (Dybbøl) in April; Schleswig is annexed by Prussia; (May) Fontane visits the battlefield of Düppel; (September) Fontane revisits the war locations, travels through the whole of Denmark, and immerses himself in Danish history and culture.

1865 Publishes a book, *The Schleswig-Holstein War of 1864*.

1866 War between Prussia and Austria, concluded by the Prussian victory at Königgrätz on 3 July and Austrian capitulation on 22 July. Fontane visits the battle locations in Bohemia.

1869 Publishes *The German War of 1866*.

1870 Franco-Prussian War; (1–2 September) decisive Prussian victory at Sedan. Fontane, visiting battlefields, is taken prisoner by the French on 5 October and confined in various prisons, including Oléron off the coast of Gascony, until released in December thanks to intervention by Bismarck.

1871 (18 January) German Empire proclaimed in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles; Wilhelm I of Prussia becomes Emperor. Fontane publishes a book about his captivity, *Taken Prisoner*.

1874 (October–November) Visits Italy with his wife.

1875 (August) Second visit to Italy.

1876 Fontane becomes Secretary of the Academy of Arts in Berlin, but so hates his bureaucratic tasks that he resigns his post, and with it financial security, within three months, thereby upsetting his wife and putting their marriage under severe but temporary strain.

1878 Publishes his first novel, *Vor dem Sturm* (*Before the Storm*), about Prussian resistance to French occupation in the winter of 1812–13.

1882 *L'Adultera* (*The Woman Taken in Adultery*), his first novel set in contemporary society, with a theme anticipating that of *Effi Briest*.

1884 Foundation of the Society for German Colonization to encourage Germany to copy other European powers in acquiring overseas colonies. Germany establishes protectorates in East Africa (now Tanzania) and South-West Africa (now Namibia).

1887 C*écile*, a novel about a ‘fallen woman’.

1888 The ‘Year of Three Emperors’: Wilhelm I dies on 9 March; is succeeded by Friedrich III (son-in-law of Queen Victoria), who dies of throat cancer on 15 June, and is in turn succeeded by his son Wilhelm II (1859–1941), whose reign ends with the fall of the Empire in November 1918. *Irrungen Wirrungen* (*On Tangled Paths*), a Berlin novel about a cross-class relationship.

1890 Bismarck is dismissed from his post as Imperial Chancellor.

1891 *Quitt* (*Quits*), a novel set largely in America.

1892 *Unwiederbringlich* (*No Way Back*), a novel of marriage, set in Denmark.

1893 *Frau Jenny Treibel*, a humorous social novel set in Berlin.

1894 *Meine Kinderjahre* (*My Childhood*), the first volume of Fontane’s autobiography.

1895 *Effi Briest*.

1896 *Die Poggenpuhls* (*The Poggenpuhl Family*), another Berlin novel.

1898 *Von Zwanzig bis Dreißig* (*From Twenty to Thirty*), a further instalment of Fontane’s autobiography. Another volume, *Kritische Jahre—Kritikerjahre* (*Critical Years–Years as Critic*), covering the decade from his fiftieth to his sixtieth year, remained a fragment. (20 September) Fontane dies. *Der Stechlin* (*The Stechlin*), by common consent one of Fontane’s finest novels, is published posthumously.

EFFI BRIEST

Chapter 1

OUTSIDE the manor house in Hohen-Cremmen,* where the Briests had lived since the days when Georg Wilhelm* had been elector of Brandenburg, the village street, quiet at midday, lay in bright sunshine, whilst on the park and garden side a wing built on at right angles threw a long shadow over a path of white and green flagstones and then across a large, circular flowerbed with a sundial in the middle and *Canna indica** and giant rhubarb planted round the edge. Some twenty yards away, running precisely parallel to the side wing, was a churchyard wall, entirely covered in small-leaved ivy and only interrupted by a little, white-painted iron door, beyond which the shingle tower of Hohen-Cremmen church rose up, its weathercock gleaming gold, since it had only recently been repainted. The main building, the wing, and the churchyard wall formed a horseshoe round a little flower-garden, at the open side of which a pond with a jetty and a boat tied up could be seen and, by the edge, a swing, its seat a horizontal board hanging from two ropes on either side—the posts supporting the cross-beam were already sagging a little. Between the pond and the flowerbed, however, and half-concealing the swing, stood a pair of massive old plane trees.

The front of the manor house—a terrace with tubs of aloe and a few garden chairs—was also a pleasant place to be and to amuse oneself when it was overcast; on days when the sun was burning down, however, the garden side was infinitely preferable, especially for the lady of the house and her daughter, who on this day were once more sitting in the shade on the flagged path, with a few open windows with Virginia creeper twining round behind them and, beside them, a small staircase of four stone steps leading up from the garden to the mezzanine of the wing. Both of them, mother and daughter, were busy at work on an altar-cloth made up from separate squares; countless hanks of wool and skeins of silk were scattered over a big table, with a few side-plates left over from lunch and a majolica bowl full of lovely big gooseberries. The tapestry needles went in and out, swiftly and precisely, but while the mother kept her eyes fixed on her work, her daughter, who was known as Effi,* would put her needle down from time to time to get up and, bending and stretching this way and that, go through the whole series of callisthenic exercises. It was clear to see that she was particularly fond of these movements, which she deliberately exaggerated a little for comic effect, and when she stood there, slowly raising her arms and putting the palms of her hands together high above her head, her mother would look up from her needlework, though always briefly and surreptitiously because she did not want to show how charming she found her own daughter, a feeling of maternal pride that was entirely justified. Effi was wearing a blue-and-white striped linen dress, a bit like a smock, that needed its tight bronze leather belt to give it a waist; a wide sailor collar thrown back over her shoulders left her neck free.

Everything she did combined high spirits and gracefulness, and her laughing brown eyes revealed a great deal of natural intelligence and much *joie de vivre* and warm-heartedness. She was called ‘little Effi’, which she had to put up with simply because her beautiful, slim mother was still at least a couple of inches taller.

Effi had just stood up once more to do her twists and turns to the left and right when her mother, looking up from her embroidery again, called out to her, ‘You really ought to have been a circus artiste, Effi. Always on the trapeze, always flying through the air. I can almost imagine you’d enjoy something like that.’

‘Perhaps, Mama. But if that’s the case, whose fault is it? Where do I get it from? It has to be from you. Or do you think I get it from Papa? You see, the very idea makes even you laugh. And then why do you stick me in this pinafore dress, in this boy’s smock? Sometimes I think I’m going to be back in short clothes again. And once I’m wearing *those*, I’ll start curtseying like a little girl again, and when the Rathenow Hussars* come riding past I’ll ride a cock-horse in Colonel Goetze’s lap.* And why not? He’s three-quarters an uncle and only one-quarter a beau. It’s your fault. Why don’t I get any fine gowns? Why don’t you make a lady out of me?’

‘Is that what you’d like?’

‘No.’ And with that she dashed over to her Mama, flung her arms round her, and kissed her.

‘Not so wild, Effi, you mustn’t get into such a passion. It always makes me uneasy when I see you like that …’ Her mother seemed determined to continue to express her worries and fears, but it didn’t come to that, for at that very moment three young girls came into the garden through the little iron door in the churchyard wall and set off along a gravel path towards the circular flowerbed and sundial. All three waved their parasols as a greeting to Effi then hurried over to Frau von Briest to kiss her hand. She asked them a few questions then invited the girls to keep them, or at least Effi, company for half an hour. ‘I’ve got enough to do as it is, and anyway, young folk prefer to be amongst themselves. Good-day to you.’ And saying which, she went up the stone steps into the wing of the house.

And with that the young folk were truly left to themselves.

Two of the girls—short, plump lasses whose freckles and good humour went very well with their auburn hair—were the daughters of Jahnke,* the church organist and village schoolmaster, who swore by the Hanseatic League,* everything Scandinavian, and his favourite writer and fellow Mecklenburger, Fritz Reuter;* on the model of the twins, Mining and Lining, from Reuter’s popular novel, he had given his own twins the names

Bertha and Hertha.* The third young lady was Hulda Niemeyer, Pastor Niemeyer's only child; she was more ladylike than the other two, but boring and conceited, a pale, puffy blonde with weak, slightly protuberant eyes that still seemed to be constantly seeking something, which had induced Klitzing* of the Hussars to say: 'Doesn't she look as if she's expecting the Angel Gabriel* to arrive at any moment?'

Effi thought that the rather censorious Klitzing was only too right, but still took care not to make any distinction between her three friends. She felt least like doing that at this moment and, leaning her arms on the table, she said, 'This tedious embroidery. Thank God you're here.'

'But we drove your Mama away,' said Hulda.

'No you didn't. As she said, she would have gone anyway; she's expecting a visitor, you see, an old friend from before she was married. I must tell you about it later, a love story with a hero and a heroine and ending with renunciation. You'll be amazed, you really will. I've already met Mama's old friend, over in Schwantikow;* he's a Landrat,* a fine figure of a man.'

'That's the main thing,' Hertha said.

'Of course it's the main thing. "Women womanly, men manly"—as you know that's one of Papa's favourite sayings. And now help me get this table tidied up, otherwise I'll be in for a telling-off again.'

In no time at all the hanks of silk and wool were packed in the basket, and when they were all sitting down Hulda said, 'Come on Effi, it's time now: the love story with renunciation. Or was it not that bad?'

'A story with renunciation is never bad. But I can't start until Hertha's had some of the gooseberries—she can't take her eyes off them. Anyway, take as many as you like, we can pick some more afterwards; only throw the hulls well away or, better still, put them on the newspaper supplement here, then we'll wrap them up in it and clear everything away. Mama hates it when the husks are lying all over the place, she's always saying you could slip on them and break your leg.'

'I don't believe that,' Hertha said, tucking into the gooseberries.

'Me neither,' Effi said. 'Just think, I fall over at least two or three times every day and I've never broken anything. A proper leg doesn't break that easily, certainly not mine, nor yours, Hertha. What do you think, Hulda?'

'One shouldn't tempt fate; pride comes before a fall.'

'Always the governess; you're a born old spinster.'

'And still hope to get married. And perhaps before you.'

'Doesn't bother me. Do you think I'm just waiting for that? That's the last thing I need. Anyway, I'm going to get a husband, and that perhaps soon. I'm not worried. Only recently little Ventivegni from Rathenow said to me: "What will you bet, Fräulein Effi, that we'll be here again in a year's time listening to them smashing crockery for an eve-of-wedding party." '*

'And what did you say to that?'

'Could well be, I said, could well be; Hulda's the oldest, she could get married any time. But he brushed that aside and said, "No, for another young lady who's as brunette as Fräulein Hulda's blond." And as he spoke he gave me such an earnest look … But there I go, rambling on and forgetting the story.'

'Yes, you keep digressing; perhaps you don't want to tell us the story after all.'

'Oh, I do, but it's true I keep digressing because it's all a bit strange, yes, almost romantic.'

'But you said he was a Landrat.'

'A Landrat, true. And he's called Geert von Innstetten, Baron von Innstetten.'

All three laughed.

'Why are you laughing?' Effi said, put out. 'What's all this about?'

'Oh, Effi, we're not trying to insult you, nor the Baron either. Innstetten, you said? And Geert? No one round here has that kind of name. Though, of course, there's often something funny about the names of nobles.'

'Yes, my dear, there is. That's why they're nobles. They can afford it, and the farther back they go, in time I mean, the more they can afford it.You know nothing about that, but don't take it amiss, we'll still stay good friends. Geert von Innstetten, then, and a baron. He's the same age as Mama, to the very day.'

'And how old is your Mama, actually?'

'Thirty-eight.'

'A fine age.'

'It is that, especially when you still look like my Mama. She's a beautiful woman, don't you agree? And the way she can do everything, always so assured and so refined and never says inappropriate things like Papa. If I were a young lieutenant I'd fall in love with Mama.'

'But how can you say something like that, Effi?' Hulda said. 'It's against the fourth commandment.'*

'Nonsense. How can it be against the fourth commandment? I think Mama would be pleased if she knew I'd said something like that.'

'That may well be,' Hertha broke in, 'but do get on with the story.'

'All right, calm down, I'm starting … Baron Innstetten, then. When he wasn't yet twenty he was stationed over there, with the Rathenow Hussars, and used to visit the estates round here a lot, but best of all he liked to be over in Schwantikow, with Grandfather Belling.* Of course, it wasn't because of Grandfather that he was over there so often, and when Mama talks about it anyone can tell whom he went to see. And I think it was mutual.'

‘So what happened?’

‘Well, what was bound to happen, what always does happen. He was far too young, and when my father appeared on the scene, already a Ritterschaftsrat* and having inherited Hohen-Cremmen, it didn’t take long for her to make up her mind. She accepted him and became Frau von Briest … And the rest, well, you know that … the rest is me.’

‘Yes, the rest, that’s you, Effi,’ Bertha said. ‘Thank God. We wouldn’t have you if things had turned out differently. But now tell us, what did Innstetten do, what became of him? He can’t have taken his own life, otherwise you wouldn’t be expecting him today.’

‘No, he didn’t take his own life. But it was something a bit along those lines.’

‘Did he try to?’

‘Not that either. But he didn’t want to stay near here, and soldiering in general seems to have been spoilt for him. It was peacetime, of course. To put it in a nutshell, he resigned his commission and started to study law, in “deadly earnest”, as Papa says; only he joined up again when war broke out* in ’70, but with the Perleberg Lancers,* not with his old regiment, and he was awarded the Iron Cross—of course, he’s very dashing. And as soon as the war was over, he went back to his files and they say Bismarck* thinks highly of him and the Emperor as well, and so it was that he was made a Landrat, Landrat in the Kessin* district.’

‘What’s this Kessin? I’ve never heard of a Kessin round here.’

‘No, it’s not in our area, it’s a fair way away from here, in Pomerania, in Eastern Pomerania even, though that doesn’t mean anything, since it’s a seaside resort (everything round there’s one of those), and this holiday he’s taking is actually a family visit, or something like that. He wants to look up old friends and relatives.’

‘Does he have relatives round here?’

‘Yes and no, it depends how you look at it. There are no Innstettens round here, in fact I don’t think there are any at all, anywhere now. But he does have distant cousins on his mother’s side, and I presume that above all he wanted to see Schwantikow and the Bellings’ house that holds so many memories for him. He was over there the day before yesterday, and he wants to spend today here in Hohen-Cremmen.’

‘And what does your father say about that?’

‘Nothing at all. He’s not like that. And then of course he knows Mama, he just teases her.’

At that moment midday struck, and before the chimes had finished Wilke, the Briests’ old factotum who looked after the house and family, came to tell Effi, ‘The Mistress would remind the Fräulein to get dressed in good time; the Herr Baron will presumably arrive at one precisely.’

And even as he was passing on this message, Wilke had already started to clear up the ladies’ sewing table, first of all picking up the sheet of newspaper with the gooseberry hulls.

‘No, Wilke, not that; the remains of the gooseberries are our business … Hertha, you wrap them up and put a stone in with them so that everything will sink better. Then we’ll go off in a long funeral procession and bury the package on the high sea.’

Wilke smirked. ‘She’s a real little devil, is our young Mistress,’ was what he was thinking. And Effi, as she placed the package on the tablecloth that had been quickly gathered up, said, ‘Now all take a hold of it, each to a corner, and we’ll sing something sad.’

‘It’s all very well to say that, Effi, but what are we to sing?’

‘Anything, it doesn’t matter what, only it has to rhyme in “oo”, “oo” is always the vowel of mourning. So let’s sing, “Stay true, true and bid the world adieu …”,’ and as Effi started her litany all four of them set off for the jetty, got into the boat that was tied up there, and let the package, that was weighted with a pebble, slide slowly down into the pond.

‘Now your guilt has been sent to the bottom, Hertha,’ Effi said, ‘and that reminds me that in olden times poor, unfortunate women used to be sent to the bottom too. Because of infidelity, of course.’

‘But not here.’

‘No, not here,’ Effi laughed, ‘things like that don’t happen here. But they do in Constantinople and, as I recall, you ought to know that too, you were there when that probationer teacher, Holzapfel, told us about it in Geography.’

‘Yes,’ Hulda said, ‘he was always telling us that kind of thing. But one quickly forgets it.’

‘Not me. I remember that kind of thing.’

Chapter 2

They continued talking for a while, recalling with outrage and pleasure their classes together and a whole series of Holzapfel's unsuitable topics. They couldn't stop until Hulda suddenly said, 'It's high time, Effi; you look, well, how can I put it, you look as if you've just come from picking cherries, everything crushed and crumpled; linen always gets so creased and your big, white turn-down collar … yes, oh, now I've got it, you look like a cabin boy.'

'Midshipman, if you please. My noble name must be worth something. Apropos midshipman or cabin boy, only recently Papa promised me a flagpole again, here by the swing, with yardarms and a rope-ladder. I'd really like that and I'd insist on fixing the pennant up there myself. And you, Hulda, you can come up the other side and at the top we'll shout "Hurrah" and give each other a kiss. By Jove, that would be something.'

' "By Jove"—there you go again … You sound like a midshipman already. But I'm certainly not climbing up after you, I'm not such a daredevil. Jahnke's quite right when he says there's too much of the Bellings in you, from your mother's side. I'm just a child of the parsonage.'

'Oh, get away. Still waters run deep. Do you remember that time when my Briest cousin was here? He was still a cadet, but grown-up enough, and you crawled along the barn roof. And why? All right, I'm not going to tell. But come on, let's go on the swing, two on each side; I'm sure it won't break, but if you don't feel like it, for I can see you're pulling long faces, let's play tig. I've still got a quarter of an hour. I don't want to go inside yet and all just to say hello to a Landrat, and a Landrat from Eastern Pomerania at that. He's pretty old, too, he could almost be my father, and if he really does live in a seaside town, and Kessin's supposed to be something like that, then I ought to please him best in this sailor's costume, he must almost see it as a kind of compliment. When royalty receive someone—I have this from Papa—they always put on a uniform from the place the other person comes from. So no holding back … quick, quick, I'm away and beside the bench here's home.'

Hulda wanted to introduce a couple of restrictions, but Effi was already heading up the nearest gravel path, once to the left, once to the right, then all at once she disappeared. 'That doesn't count, Effi; where are you? We're not playing hide and seek, we're playing tig,' and with these and other objections her friends rushed off after her, well beyond the circular flowerbed and the two plane trees beside it, until Effi suddenly burst out from her hiding-place and, being behind her pursuers, easily made it to 'home' beside the bench in no time at all.

'Where were you?'

'Behind the rhubarb. It has such huge leaves, even bigger than a figleaf …'*

'Shame on you …'

'No, shame on the three of you because you lost. Hulda with her big eyes didn't see anything again, hopeless as ever.' And with that Effi was flying off once more, beyond the flowerbed towards the pond, perhaps because she intended to hide first of all behind a thick hazel hedge growing there and then make a long detour round the churchyard and the front of the house and thus reach the wing and 'home'. It was a good idea, but even before she was halfway round the pond she heard her name being called from the house and, as she turned, saw her Mama on the stone steps waving her handkerchief. Another moment and Effi was standing beside her.

'You're still in your smock and our visitor's here. You're never on time.'

'I am on time, it's our visitor who isn't. It's not one o'clock yet; it's ages to go,' and, turning to the twins (Hulda was farther behind) called out to them, 'You keep on playing, I'll be back soon.'

*

One moment later Effi was going with her mother into the large garden room that took up almost the whole of the wing. 'You shouldn't tell me off, Mama. It really is only half-past. Why has he come so early? A proper gentleman doesn't arrive late, but even less too early.'

Frau von Briest was visibly embarrassed, but Effi snuggled up against her in a show of affection, saying, 'Sorry, I will hurry up now; you know I can be quick as well, in five minutes Cinderella will be transformed into a princess. He can wait that long or chat to Papa.'

And nodding to her Mama, she was about to skip up a little iron staircase that went from the garden room to the upper floor. But Frau von Briest, who could, on occasion, be unconventional, suddenly held Effi back as she was about to dash off, looked at the charmingly youthful creature that, still flushed from the excitement of playing, stood before her, the very picture of living freshness, and said, almost confidingly, 'Perhaps it would be best if you stayed as you are. Yes, stay like that. You look very nice. And even if it weren't so, you look quite unprepared, not at all as if you'd been specially dressed up, and that's the important thing at this point. You see, I have to tell you, Effi dear …' and she took both her daughter's hands in hers, 'I have to tell you …'

'Whatever's the matter with you, Mama? I feel quite frightened.'

' … I have to tell you, Effi, that Baron Innstetten has just asked for your hand in marriage.'

'Asked for my hand in marriage? Seriously?'

‘It’s not a matter to joke about. You saw him yesterday and I think you liked him very much as well. True, he’s older than you, which, all things considered, is a good thing. Added to that, he’s a man of character, good breeding, and with a good position, and if you don’t say no, which I can hardly imagine my clever little Effi will, at twenty you’ll be where other women are at forty. You’ll rise much higher than your Mama.’

Effi remained silent, wondering what to say, but before anything occurred to her she heard her father’s voice from the neighbouring room, still at the front of the house, and immediately afterwards Ritterschaftsrat von Briest, a well-preserved and particularly genial man in his fifties, came into the garden parlour—and with him Baron Innstetten, slim, brown-haired, and with a military bearing.

When she saw him, Effi started to tremble nervously; but not for long, for at almost the same moment as Innstetten was approaching her with a friendly bow, the heads of the auburn-haired twins appeared in the middle one of the wide-open windows, half overgrown with Virginia creeper, and Hertha, the more exuberant of the two, called, ‘Come, Effi.’

Then her head disappeared and the two sisters jumped from the back-rest of the bench they’d been standing on down into the garden, and all that could be heard was their soft giggles and laughter.

Chapter 3

On that very same day Baron Innstetten had become engaged to Effi Briest. At the following meal to celebrate the engagement the affable father of the bride, who had some difficulty summoning up the required solemnity, proposed a toast to the young couple, which tugged a little at Frau von Briest's heartstrings as she thought back to a time that was hardly eighteen years ago. But not for long; *she* hadn't been the one, now it was her daughter instead of her—just as good, all in all, if not perhaps even better. Life with Briest was tolerable, even though he was somewhat down-to-earth and could at times make suggestive remarks. Towards the end of the meal, the ice-cream was already being served, the old Ritterschaftsrat stood up to address them again and proposed that they should use the familiar *du* to each other. He embraced Innstetten and gave him a kiss on the left cheek. But that wasn't the end of it, he went on to suggest, along with the *du*, more intimate names and titles for use among themselves, setting up a kind of informal list, naturally retaining well-established individual appellations. For his wife, he said, it would presumably be best to continue to call her 'Mama' (for there were young mamas as well), while for himself, renouncing his claim to the honourable title of 'Papa', he had a decided preference for the simple 'Briest', not least because it was nice and short. And as far as the children were concerned—at that word, eye to eye with Innstetten, who was only about twelve years his junior, he had to pull himself together—well, Effi was Effi and Geert Geert. Geert, if he was not mistaken, meant a tall, slim trunk, which would make Effi the ivy that was to twine itself round it. At this the engaged couple gave each other rather embarrassed looks, Effi's with a touch of childlike merriment, but Frau von Briest said, 'Say what you have to say, Briest, and formulate your toasts as you like, only I would ask you to avoid poetic metaphors, they're outside your sphere of competence.' To which rebuke Briest responded with acceptance rather than dissent. 'You might possibly be right there, Luise.'*

Immediately after they left the table Effi excused herself in order to go to the parsonage to see the Niemeyers. On the way there she said to herself, 'I think Hulda will be annoyed. Now I've beaten her to it after all—she was always too vain and stuck-up.' But Effi was not quite right in this; Hulda kept her composure and behaved very well, leaving the expression of annoyance and resentment to her mother, who then made some very odd remarks. 'Oh yes, that's the way things are. Of course. If it couldn't be the mother, it had to be the daughter. We know all about that. Old families always stick together, and to those that have shall be given.' Pastor Niemeyer was extremely embarrassed at this stream of caustic remarks, with no sense of refinement or propriety, and once more regretted having married his housekeeper.

From the parsonage Effi naturally went to the Jahnkes, where the twins were already looking out for her and came to meet her in the front garden.

'Well, Effi,' Hertha said as the three of them walked up and down between the beds of marigolds in flower on either side, 'well, Effi, how do you feel?'

'How do I feel? Oh, very well. We're already on first-name terms and calling each other *du*. He's called Geert—as I've already told you, of course.'

'Yes, you have. But it makes me feel so worried. Is he the right man for you?'

'Of course he's the right man. You don't understand, Hertha. Every man's the right one. Of course he has to belong to the nobility, have a position, and be presentable.'

'God, Effi, the way you're talking. You used to talk quite differently.'

'Used to, yes.'

'And do you feel very happy now?'

'You're always very happy when you've been engaged for just two hours. At least I imagine you must be.'

'But don't you feel, well, how shall I put it, a bit awkward?'

'Yes, I do feel a bit awkward but not very much. And I think I'll be able to get over it.'

After these calls at the parsonage and the organist's, that hadn't taken even half an hour, Effi had gone back to the manor house, where they were about to have coffee on the garden veranda. Father-in-law and son-in-law were walking up and down the gravel path between the two plane trees.

Briest talked about the difficult side of a Landrat's position; various ones had been offered to him, but each time he had declined. 'I've always preferred to do things my own way, at least—sorry, Innstetten—rather than having to keep an eye on the powers that be all the time. Then you're always looking out for those above you and those above them. Here I can live my own life, taking pleasure in every green leaf, in the Virginia creeper growing round the windows over there.'

He went on like that, with all manner of anti-officialdom comments, excusing himself now and then with a brief, 'sorry, Innstetten'. Innstetten nodded mechanically, but his mind wasn't really on the topic; rather, he kept on looking across to the Virginia creeper entwined round the window that Briest had just mentioned, and as he pursued these thoughts it was as if he could see the heads of the two auburn-haired girls among the creeper and hear their high-spirited 'Come, Effi.'

He didn't believe in omens and that sort of thing, on the contrary, he rejected any kind of superstition. But, despite that, he could not get the two words out of his mind, and while Briest rattled on, he kept feeling that the little incident had been more than mere chance.

*

Innstetten, who had only taken short leave, left the next day, after having promised he would write every day. 'Yes, you must do that,' Effi had said, a response that truly came from the heart, since for years there had been nothing she liked better than to get lots of letters, for example on her birthday. Everyone had to write to her on that day. Remarks like 'and Gertrud and Klara also send you their best wishes' casually included in a letter were frowned on; if Gertrud and Klara wanted to remain her friends, then they had to see that a letter came with its own stamp on it, a foreign one if possible, from Switzerland or Carlsbad, since Effi's birthday fell during the summer holidays.

Innstetten actually did write every day, as promised; what made this correspondence particularly pleasant, however, was the fact that he only expected one short letter of reply a week. And these he did receive, full of charmingly important news that never failed to delight him. It was Frau von Briest who dealt with the more serious business that had to be discussed with her future son-in-law: arrangements regarding the wedding, questions of the dowry and the running of the household. The furnishings in Innstetten's house in Kessin were, if not sumptuous, at least very much befitting a man of his status, and it made sense for her to get a good idea of what was there through their correspondence so that they didn't buy anything that wouldn't be needed. Once Frau von Briest had sufficient information about all these things, it was decided that mother and daughter should go to Berlin to acquire what Briest called 'Princess Effi's trousseau'. Effi was very much looking forward to their stay in Berlin, especially since her father had agreed that they could stay at the Hotel du Nord.* The cost could be deducted from her dowry, Briest said, since Innstetten had everything anyway. Unconcerned whether he meant it seriously or in jest, Effi—unlike her mother, who told him sharply to forget such *mesquineries** once and for all—joyfully agreed with her father, her thoughts much, much more concerned with the impression the two of them, mother and daughter, would make in the dining-room than with Spinn & Menke, Goschenhofer,* and other similar firms that were on their provisional list. And once their great Berlin week had arrived, she acted out these delightful imaginings. Her cousin Dagobert, an uncommonly lively lieutenant in the Tsar Alexander Guards Regiment*—he took *Die Fliegenden Blätter** and kept a note of the latest jokes—placed himself at their disposal for every hour when he was not on duty, and so they had a table with him in the corner window of Café Kranzler or, at an appropriate time, in Café Bauer* as well, and in the afternoon they went to the Zoo to see the giraffes, of which her cousin—Cousin Dagobert—liked to say that they looked like aristocratic old maids. They had a programme they followed every day, and thus on the third or fourth they went to the National Gallery, because Dagobert wanted to show his cousin the *Island of the Blest*.* His cousin, he said, was on the point of getting married, but it would perhaps be a good idea if she became acquainted with the *Island of the Blest* beforehand. His aunt gave him a little slap with her fan, but accompanied it with such a gracious look that he saw no reason to change his tone. They were divine days for all three of them, not least for Effi's cousin, who was such an excellent chaperone and always quick to resolve any little disagreements. There was no lack of differences of opinion between mother and daughter, but that was just the way things are and fortunately they never cropped up over the purchases they needed to make. Effi was happy with everything, whether they bought six or three-dozen of a particular item, and when they talked about the price of the things they had just purchased on the way back to the hotel, she regularly confused the figures. Frau von Briest, who was usually very critical, even towards her beloved child, not only took this apparent lack of interest lightly, she even regarded it as an advantage. 'All these things', she told herself, 'mean very little to Effi. She's undemanding as far as worldly goods are concerned; she lives in the world of her imagination, and if Princess Maria Anna* drives past and gives her a friendly wave from her carriage, that means more to her than a whole chestful of linen.'

All this was true, but only half true. The possession of more or less everyday objects didn't matter much to Effi, but when she walked up and down Unter den Linden with her Mama and, after examining the most splendid window displays, went into Demuth's* to buy all sorts of things for their honeymoon trip to Italy, then her true character came out. Only the most elegant items were good enough for her, and if she couldn't have the best, then she refused to make do with second-best, because it meant nothing to her. Yes, she had the ability to do without things, her mother was right about that, and there was something undemanding about that ability; but on the occasions when there was something she did have to acquire, then it had to be something very special. And in that she was demanding.

Chapter 4

Cousin Dagobert was at the station when the ladies set off back for Hohen-Cremmen. They had been happy days, above all in that they had not had to suffer the company of an awkward relative, one almost beneath their social station. 'This time,' Effi had said as soon as they arrived, 'we must remain incognito as far as Aunt Therese is concerned. It's either the Hotel du Nord or Aunt Therese, the two don't go together.' Eventually her mother had agreed to that, and had even sealed her agreement with a kiss on her darling's forehead.

It was, of course, quite different with Cousin Dagobert. He not only had the Guards' bearing, above all he had the good humour that was almost traditional among Tsar Alexander officers, and that from the very beginning had enabled him to stimulate and amuse both mother and daughter, and this mood had lasted to the very end of their stay. 'Well, Dagobert,' Effi said as they took their leave, 'you must come to my eve-of-wedding party, and with a retinue, of course. After the sketches* (but don't turn up as a porter or a mousetrap seller) there'll be a ball. And, you must remember, it's going to be my first ball and possibly also my last. No entry with less than six of your comrades—excellent dancers, of course. And you can all go back on the early train.' Her cousin promised to comply and so they parted.

The two arrived at their station in the Havelland Marshes round midday and were back in Hohen-Cremmen after a half-hour drive. Briest was glad to have his wife and daughter at home again and asked question after question, mostly without waiting for an answer, telling them instead what had happened in Hohen-Cremmen in the meantime. 'You told me just now about the National Gallery and the *Island of the Blest*—well, we had something of the sort here, while you were away: our farm manager Pink and the gardener's wife. I had to dismiss Pink, of course, though unwillingly. It's very awkward that such things almost always happen at harvest time. And in all other respects Pink was an uncommonly capable man, just in the wrong place here, unfortunately. But that's enough of that, Wilke's getting restless.'

Over lunch Briest concentrated more on what they were saying; he was happy that they had got on so well with Effi's cousin, about whom they had much to tell him, less so about their behaviour towards Aunt Therese. But it was clear that, behind all his disapproval, he was actually pleased with it; a little bit of mischief was something that appealed to him, and Aunt Therese really did cut a ridiculous figure. And when, after lunch, they unpacked some of the nicest of their purchases for him to say what he thought of them, he showed great interest, which didn't even flag, or at least didn't entirely disappear, when he glanced through the bill. 'A bit expensive, or rather, let's say, very expensive. Everything so chic, I mean so stimulating, that I definitely feel that if you were to give me a suitcase and a travelling rug like these we'd end up in Rome at Easter as well, on our own honeymoon after eighteen years. What d'you think, Luise? "Late ye come, but ye have come,"* as Schiller has it.'

Frau von Briest waved her hand as if to say, 'He's incorrigible,' and left him to his own sense of shame, which wasn't all that great.

*

August had ended, the wedding day (the 3rd of October) was approaching, and in the parsonage and the schoolhouse, as well as in the manor house, the preparations for the eve-of-wedding party were in full swing. Jahnke, true to his enthusiasm for Fritz Reuter, had thought up something particularly apposite, letting Bertha and Hertha appear as Lining and Mining, in Low German dialect of course, while Hulda was to play Kleist's Käthchen von Heilbronn,* the scene under the elder tree, with Lieutenant Engelbrecht of the Hussars as Wetter vom Strahl. Niemeyer, from whom the idea came, had insisted on writing a sly reference to Innstetten and Effi into the scene. He himself was very pleased with his work and received much praise from all involved after the first rehearsal, with the exception, however, of his patron and old friend Briest, who, after listening to the mixture of Kleist and Niemeyer, protested vigorously, though not for literary reasons. ' "My lord" here and "my lord" there—what's the point? It's misleading, it distorts everything. Innstetten is a capital specimen of humanity, no question, a man of character and very dashing, but the Briests—forgive the colloquialism, Luise—the Briests are not to be sneezed at either. After all, we're a family who've played a part in history, thank God, let me add, and the Innstettens* are *not*; the Innstettens are merely old—ancient nobility, if you like, but what does that mean? And I don't want a Briest, or at least a character in an eve-of-wedding party sketch in whom everyone can see a reflection of our Effi—I don't want a Briest saying "my lord" all the time. For that Innstetten would have to be at least a by-blow* of the Hohenzollerns, and there are some of those around. But he isn't that, and I repeat, it distorts the situation.'

And indeed, for a while Briest stuck particularly doggedly to that view. Only after the second rehearsal, in which 'Käthchen', already half in costume, wore a very close-fitting bodice, was he—who anyway was not slow in making complimentary remarks to Hulda—sufficiently carried away to remark that Käthchen was very well done, which was as good as a surrender, or at least led to one. That all these things were kept secret from Effi

doesn't need to be said. Had she shown more curiosity that would of course have been impossible, but Effi had so little desire to find out about the arrangements and planned surprises that she told her mother emphatically that she was happy to wait and see and when her mother expressed doubts about that, Effi would repeat her assertion that that really was the case, her mother could believe it. And why not? she added, it was all just play-acting, and it couldn't be nicer and more poetic than *Cinderella*[*] that they'd seen on their last evening in Berlin. She'd really have loved to act in that, if only to make a chalk-mark on the back of the silly boarding-school teacher. 'And how delightful the last act was, "Cinderella's awakening as a princess," or at least as a countess, really, it was just like a fairy-tale.' She often spoke like that, and was mostly more high-spirited than before, though she did find her friends' constant whispering and secretiveness irritating. 'I wish they'd put on less important airs and pay more attention to me. Afterwards they're going to be stuck here and I'll have to worry about them and be ashamed that they're my friends.'

That was Effi's mocking tongue, and there was no doubt that she was unconcerned about the party and wedding. It did give Frau von Briest some pause for thought, but she wasn't worried, because Effi was much preoccupied with her future, which was a good sign, and with her lively imagination could go on for a whole quarter of an hour describing her life in Kessin, descriptions which incidentally expressed a strange idea of Eastern Pomerania or, perhaps, were cleverly calculated to express that idea. She made a point of seeing Kessin as a semi-Siberian town that was never entirely free of ice and snow.

'Goschendorfer's have sent the last things today,' Frau von Briest said when, as usual, she was sitting with Effi outside the wing, at their work-table on which the piles of linen were growing while there were fewer and fewer newspapers, they simply took up space. 'I hope you've got everything now, Effi. However, if there are any more little things you'd like, you'll need to say so now, best of all at this very moment. Papa got a very good price for the rape and is in an uncommonly good mood.'

'Uncommonly? He's always in a good mood.'

'In an uncommonly good mood,' her mother repeated. 'And we must exploit that. So tell me. When we were in Berlin I sometimes had the feeling there was this or that object that you particularly wanted.'

'What can I say, Mama dear, I do really have everything one needs, I mean everything one needs *here*. But since it is my fate to end up so far to the north—I must add that I've nothing against that, on the contrary, I'm looking forward to the Northern Lights and the stars shining more brightly—but since that is my fate, I would like to have a fur.'

'But Effi, child, that's all foolishness. You're not going to St Petersburg or Archangel.'

'No. But I'll be on the way there …'

'Of course, child. You'll be on the way there, but what does that mean? If you go from here to Nauen you'll be on the way to Russia. But anyway, if that's what you want you shall have your fur. Only let me tell you first that I advise against it. A fur is for older women, even your old Mama's still too young for one, and if you, at seventeen, turn up in mink or marten the Kessiners will think you're in fancy dress.'

*

It was the 2nd of September when they had this conversation, and it would have continued if it hadn't happened to be Sedan Day.[*] As it was, they were interrupted by the sound of fifes and drums, and Effi, who had heard of the procession that was to take place but then forgotten about it, at once rushed off from the work-table, past the circular flowerbed and the pond, to a little balcony on the churchyard wall with six steps, no wider than the rungs of a ladder, leading up to it. She was up there in a flash and, yes, all the pupils from the school were approaching, Jahnke marching solemnly on the right flank whilst a little drum-major, well in front, was leading the procession with an expression that looked as if he intended to fight the Battle of Sedan again. Effi waved her handkerchief and, thus acknowledged, the drum-major did not fail to salute her with his shining mace.

*

A week later mother and daughter were sitting at the same place again and busy with their work. It was a beautiful day; the heliotrope in its neat little bed round the sundial was still in bloom and the scent was carried over to them on the gentle breeze.

'Oh, I do feel happy,' Effi said, 'so happy that I can't imagine heaven is any better. And then, who knows if they have such wonderful heliotrope in heaven.'

'But Effi, you mustn't say things like that; you get it from your father, for whom nothing's sacred. He recently said Niemeyer looked like Lot.[*] Outrageous. And what's that supposed to mean? In the first place he doesn't know what Lot looked like, and in the second it shows an immense lack of consideration for Hulda. It's a good job Niemeyer only has one daughter, which means the comparison doesn't work. In just one respect he was only too right, in everything he said about "Lot's wife" and our good parson's lady, who once again ruined our Sedan Day with her stupidity and presumptuousness. Which reminds me. We were interrupted in our conversation when Jahnke came past with the schoolchildren—at least I can't imagine that the fur you spoke about then is the only thing you'd like. So tell me, my treasure, what else do you have in mind?'

‘Nothing, Mama.’

‘Really nothing?’

‘No, really nothing; quite seriously … though if there does have to be something after all …’

‘Well then …’

‘ … it would be a Japanese bed-screen, black, with golden birds on it, all with a long crane’s beak … and then perhaps another lamp for our bedroom, with a red glow.’

Frau von Briest said nothing.

‘There, you see, Mama, you’re saying nothing and looking as if I’ve said something particularly improper.’

‘No, Effi, not improper—and certainly not to your mother. I know what you’re like. You’re a very imaginative little person, you most like to visualize scenes from your future, and the more colourful they are, the more beautiful and desirable they seem to you. I could see that when we were buying the things for your journey. And now you think it will be really wonderful to have a bed-screen with all kinds of fabulous animals on it, all in the half-light of a red lamp. It seems like a fairy-tale to you, and you’d like to be the princess.’

Effi took her mother’s hand and kissed it. ‘Yes, Mama, that’s the way I am.’

‘Yes, that’s the way you are. I’m well aware of that. But, Effi dear, in life we have to be careful, especially we women. And when you get to Kessin, a little place where there’s hardly a street-light on at night, people will laugh at that kind of thing. And laughing will be the least of it. Those who are ill-disposed towards you, and there are always some people like that, will talk about you being badly brought up, and perhaps even worse.’

‘So nothing Japanese and no lamp. But I have to admit, I imagined it would be very beautiful and poetic to see everything in a red glow.’

Frau von Briest was moved. She stood up and gave Effi a kiss. ‘You’re a child. Beautiful and poetic. These are imaginings. The real world is different, and it’s often good that there can be darkness instead of light and a soft glow.’

Effi seemed about to reply, but at that moment Wilke came with the post. One letter was from Innstetten in Kessin. ‘Oh, from Geert,’ Effi said, and putting the letter on one side, she went on in a calm tone, ‘But you will allow me to have the grand piano at an angle in the drawing-room, won’t you. That’s more important to me than the fireplace Geert’s promised. And the portrait of you, I’m going to put that on an easel; I can’t be completely without you. Oh, how I’ll miss you all, perhaps even on the journey there and definitely when we’re in Kessin. They say there’s no garrison there, not even a surgeon-major, it’s a good thing it’s at least a seaside resort. Cousin Dagobert—I’ll take heart from this, his mother and sister always go to Warnemünde, and I really don’t see why he shouldn’t dispatch his relatives off to Kessin for once. “Dispatch,” that sounds very general staff, which is where I believe his ambitions lie. And then, of course, he’ll accompany them and stay with us. Moreover, the Kessiners, someone was telling me recently, have a pretty big steamer that goes over to Sweden twice a week. And there’s a ball on the ship (they have a band, of course) and he’s a very good dancer …’

‘Who?’

‘Well, Dagobert.’

‘I thought you meant Innstetten. Anyway, it’s time we knew what he’s got to say … The letter’s still in your pocket.’

‘Oh, yes. I’d almost forgotten it.’ She opened the letter and glanced through it.

‘Well, Effi, nothing to say? You’re not beaming and not laughing. And his letters are always so cheerful and amusing and not at all full of fatherly wisdom.’

‘I wouldn’t have that. He has his age and I have my youth. And I’d wag my finger at him and say, “Just think which is better, Geert.” ’

‘And then he’d reply, “What you have, Effi, that’s what is better.” He not only has perfect manners, he’s fair and understanding and knows very well what youth means. He keeps telling himself that, and is attuning himself to youth. And if he stays like that after you’re wed, you’ll have an ideal marriage.’

‘Yes, I think so too, Mama. But can you imagine, I’m almost ashamed to say it, but I’m not very keen on what people call an ideal marriage.’

‘That’s just like you. So tell me, what are you actually keen on?’

‘I’m … well, I’m all for having the same interests, and affection and love as well. And if affection and love aren’t possible, because love, as Papa says, is stuff and nonsense (which I don’t believe), then I’m all for wealth and a grand house, a *very* grand house, where Prince Friedrich Karl will come for the hunting, elk or capercaillies, and the old emperor will drive up and have a gracious word for all the ladies, even the young ones. And then when we’re in Berlin I’m for the court ball and a gala performance at the opera, always right next to the royal box.’

‘Are you making that up and letting yourself get carried away?’

‘No, Mama, I’m really serious. Love comes first, but immediately after that comes esteem and honour, and then comes diversion, always something new, always something to make me laugh or cry. What I can’t stand is boredom.’

‘Then how did you manage with us?’

‘Oh, how can you say that, Mama! Of course, when our charming relations drive over in the winter and stay for six hours, sometimes even longer, and Aunt Gundel and Aunt Olga look me over and think I’m a pert young

miss—Aunt Gundel told me that once—yes, then it can be pretty dreary, I have to admit. But otherwise I've always been happy here, very happy …'

And as she said that, she threw herself down on her knees and, bursting into tears, kissed her mother's hands

'Get up, Effi. These are just moods that take you when you're as young as you are and about to be wed and don't know what the future holds. But now read the letter out to me, unless there's something very special in it, or secrets.'

'Secrets!' Effi laughed and jumped up, her mood suddenly changing again. 'Secrets! Well, yes, he does try now and again, but I could put most of his letters up on the board with the Landrat's ordinances outside the mayor's office. Well, Geert is a Landrat himself, of course.'

'Read it, read it.'

' "Dear Effi … "—that's how they always start, and sometimes he also calls me his "little Eve".'

'Read it … you're to read it out.'

'Right then:

'DEAR EFFI,

The closer our wedding day comes, the less frequent your letters are. When the post arrives, I always look for your handwriting first of all but, as you know (and I have to say that it was what I wanted), generally in vain. At the moment the tradesmen are in the house, making the rooms (though only a few) ready for when you come. The best will presumably only be done while we are away. Madelung, the decorator who is delivering everything, is quite a character, I'll tell you about him in my next letter, but above all how happy I am with you, my sweet little Effi. I can't wait to get away from here and our little town is getting quieter and lonelier. The last holidaymaker left yesterday; in the end he was bathing in the sea at nine degrees and the attendants were always glad when he came out safe and sound. They were afraid he might have a stroke, that would have damaged our reputation as a bathing resort, as if the waves were worse here than elsewhere. I rejoice when I think that in four weeks' time I'll be going from the Piazzetta to the Lido with you or out to Murano, where they make glass pearls and beautiful jewellery. And the most beautiful piece will be for you.

Best wishes to your parents and a most tender kiss for you from

your Geert.'

Effi folded the letter up to put it back in the envelope.

'That's a very nice letter,' said Frau von Briest, 'and that he strikes the right balance in everything is one more virtue.'

'The right balance, yes, he does strike that.'

'Effi, dear, let me ask you one thing: would you prefer it if his letter *didn't* strike the right balance, would you rather he were more affectionate, perhaps rapturously affectionate?'

'No, no, Mama. Really and truly no, I wouldn't want that. It's better as it is.'

'It's better as it is. What does that sound like? You're so strange. And crying just now. Is there something bothering you? There's still time. Is it that you don't love Geert?'

'Why shouldn't I love him? I love Hulda and I love Bertha and I love Hertha. And I love old Niemeyer as well. And I don't need to say that I love you and Papa. I love everyone who means well by me, who's kind to me, who spoils me. And I expect Geert will spoil me as well. In his own way, of course. He's already said he's going to give me some jewellery in Venice. He has no idea that jewellery means nothing to me. I prefer climbing and swinging, most of all when it makes me afraid that something might tear or break and I might fall down. It wouldn't be the end of the world.'

'And do you perhaps also love your cousin Dagobert?'

'Yes, very much. He always cheers me up.'

'And would you have liked to marry him?'

'Marry him? For goodness sake, no. He's still not much more than a boy. Geert's a man, a fine figure of a man, a man with whom I can put on a show, a man who will be somebody. What an idea, Mama.'

'Well that's right, Effi, I'm pleased about that. But there's still something you have on your mind.'

'Perhaps.'

'Tell me.'

'You see, Mama, there's nothing wrong with the fact that he's older than me, it could perhaps be a good thing. He isn't old and he's fit and healthy and very soldierly and dashing. And I could almost say I'd have absolutely nothing against him if only … yes, if only he were a little different.'

'In what way, Effi?'

'Yes, in what way. Now you mustn't laugh at me. There are some things I've only recently picked up, over in the parsonage. We were talking about Innstetten, and suddenly Niemeyer furrowed his brow, but it was out of respect, out of admiration, and he said, "Yes, the Baron! He's a man of character, a man with principles." '

'He is that, Effi.'

'Certainly. Niemeyer even went on to say high principles. Oh, and I … I haven't got any. And you see, Mama, that's what worries me and torments me. He's so kind and good to me and considerate but … I'm afraid of him.'

Chapter 5

The celebrations in Hohen-Cremmen were over; everyone had left, including the young couple, who went on the evening of their wedding day.

Everyone had been happy with the eve-of-wedding party, especially those who had played a part, and Hulda had been the toast of all the young officers, both the Rathenow Hussars and their somewhat more demanding comrades of Tsar Alexander's Regiment. Yes, everything had gone well and smoothly, almost better than expected. Only Bertha and Hertha had sobbed so much that Jahnke's Low German lines had been as good as inaudible. But even that had done nothing to spoil the occasion. Some of the more discriminating were even of the opinion that that was what really counted; forgetting lines, sobbing, being incomprehensible—in *that* sign* (especially when it was such pretty auburn heads) one always conquered most decisively. Cousin Dagobert enjoyed a special triumph in the role he had written for himself. He appeared as an assistant from Demuth's who had heard that the young bride intended to leave for Italy immediately after the wedding and was delivering a suitcase—which of course turned out to be a gigantic box of chocolates from Hövel's.* The dancing went on until three in the morning, during which old Briest, who had talked himself more and more into a champagne mood, made all sorts of remarks about the torch dance that was still the tradition at certain courts and the bizarre custom of dancing for the garter,* neverending remarks that got worse and worse, eventually going so far that a stop had to be put to them. 'Pull yourself together, Briest,' his wife had whispered to him in fairly emphatic tones, 'you're not here to make risqué jokes but to look after your guests. This is a wedding, not a hunting party.' To which Briest replied that he didn't see much difference and, anyway, he was happy.

The wedding itself had also gone well. Niemeyer had given an excellent sermon, and on the way back from the church to the manor house one of the older gentlemen from Berlin, who was on the fringes of court society, had gone so far as to say how rich in talent a country such as ours was. 'I see that as a triumph of our schools and perhaps even more of our philosophy. When I think that this Niemeyer, an old village pastor who at first looked like someone from the poorhouse … yes, my friend, you tell me, did he not speak like a court chaplain? Such tact and his mastery of the use of antithesis, just like Kögel,* and more deeply felt than him. Kögel's too cold. Of course a man in Kögel's position has to be cold. What is it that causes disaster in people's lives? Heat, always heat.' The dignitary, still unmarried but, presumably because of that, in his fourth 'relationship', to whom these words were addressed, couldn't have agreed more. 'Too much heat! … Excellent … Oh, and remind me to tell you a story afterwards.'

*

The day after the wedding was a bright October day. The morning sun was shining but there was still an autumnal freshness on the air, and Briest, who had just taken breakfast with his wife, rose and, hands behind his back, stood in front of the open fire that was gradually dying down. Frau von Briest, a piece of needlework in her hands, also moved closer to the fire and said to Wilke, who had just come in to clear away the breakfast things, 'And now, Wilke, once you've cleared up the dining-room, that must be done first, then see to it that the cakes get carried out, the hazelnut tart to the parsonage and the bowl with the little cakes to the Jahnkes. And be careful with the glasses. I mean the thin crystal ones.'

Briest, already on his third cigarette, looked very well and declared that nothing did you so much good as a wedding, your own excepted, of course.

'I don't know how you can say that, Briest. It's news to me that it made you suffer. And I couldn't say why either.'

'You are a spoilsport, Luise. But I don't take anything amiss, not even that kind of thing. Anyway, who are we to talk, when we didn't even go away on honeymoon? Your father was against it. But now Effi's on her honeymoon. She's to be envied. Left on the ten o'clock train, they must be in Regensburg by now, and I assume he'll be showing her the artistic treasures of the Valhalla*—without getting off, of course. Innstetten's an excellent fellow but he is something of an art enthusiast, and Effi, our poor Effi's a child of nature. I fear he's going to torment Effi somewhat with his mania for art.'

'Every man torments his wife. And an enthusiasm for art is far from being the worst thing.'

'No, of course not; at least it's not something to quarrel about; it's a big question. And then people are all so different. You, yes, you would have been the right person for that. In fact you'd have been more suited to Innstetten than Effi. Pity, it's too late now.'

'What a compliment, apart from the fact that it's unsuitable. But however that may be, what's gone is gone. Now he's my son-in-law, and to keep harping on about our young days will get us nowhere.'

'I just wanted to get you in a lively mood.'

'How very kind. But not necessary. I *am* in a lively mood.'

'In a good mood too?'

‘You could say that. But you mustn’t spoil it. So what is it? I can see you’ve got something on your mind.’

‘What did you think of Effi? What did you think about the whole business? She was so strange, half like a child and then so self-assured and not at all as unassuming as she ought to be towards a man like that. That can only be connected with the fact that she doesn’t really know what she has in him. Or is it simply that she’s not really in love with him? That would be bad. For all his good qualities, he’s not a man with the easy manner to win her love.’

Frau von Briest remained silent and counted the stitches on her tapestry. Eventually she said, ‘What you’ve just said, Briest, is the most sensible thing I’ve heard from you for the last three days, including your speech at the wedding dinner. I had misgivings too. But I think we can set our minds at rest.’

‘She’s poured out her heart to you?’

‘I wouldn’t put it like that. She does need to talk, but she doesn’t feel the need to say what’s really on her mind and deals with many things on her own. She’s communicative and reserved at the same time, almost secretive; all in all, a very particular combination.’

‘I agree with you entirely. So if she didn’t tell you anything, how do you know?’

‘I only said she didn’t pour out her heart to me. That kind of general confession, getting everything off your chest, that’s not her way. Everything came out in snatches and suddenly, and then it was all over just as quickly. But it seemed important to me precisely because it was so unintentional and seemed to come out, straight from the heart, by chance.’

‘And when was this and what was the occasion?’

‘It will have been three weeks ago now. We were in the garden busy with all sorts of things, large and small, for her trousseau, when Wilke brought a letter from Innstetten. She put it in her pocket and a quarter of an hour later I had to remind her that she had it. Then she read it but showed no sign of emotion at all. I was really concerned, I have to admit, in fact so concerned that I wanted to be sure, as far as you can be sure in these matters.’

‘Too true, too true.’

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘Well, all I was saying was … But that doesn’t matter. You go on, I’m all ears.’

‘So I asked her straight out how things were, and since, given her character, I wanted to avoid a solemn tone and take everything lightly, almost making a joke of it, I casually asked whether she’d perhaps rather marry her cousin Dagobert, who’d been so attentive in Berlin.’

‘And?’

‘You should have seen her. Her immediate response was a snort of laughter. Her cousin, she said, was nothing but a big cadet in a lieutenant’s uniform. And she couldn’t even fall in love with a cadet, never mind marry one. And then she talked about Innstetten, whom she suddenly saw as the incarnation of all manly virtues.’

‘And how do you explain that?’

‘It’s quite simple. However alert and vivacious and almost passionate she is, or perhaps because of that, she’s not one of those people who are really focused on love, at least not on what truly deserves that name. She’ll talk about it, even with emphasis and a tone of conviction, but only because she’s read somewhere that love is the highest thing there is, the most beautiful, the most wonderful. Perhaps it’s just something she got from that sentimental young woman Hulda, and is only repeating what she heard from her. But there’s very little feeling in it. Perhaps that will all come, God forbid, but it’s not there at the moment.’

‘And what is there? What does she have?’

‘From what I’ve observed myself and from what she’s said, two things: a love of pleasure and ambition.’

‘Well, that can happen. I find that reassuring.’

‘I don’t. Innstetten is determined to make a career for himself; he’s not a pushy place-hunter, he’s too well bred for that, but determined to make a career, and that will satisfy Effi’s ambition.’

‘Well then, that’s all to the good.’

‘Yes, it is good, but that’s only the half of it. Her ambition will be satisfied, but will her inclination for play and adventure also be? I doubt it. Innstetten is ill-equipped to provide the hourly little diversion, the stimulus, anything that counters boredom, that mortal enemy of a bright young woman. He won’t leave her without things to occupy her mind, he’s too intelligent, too astute for that, but he won’t make a great effort to amuse her. And the worst thing is that he won’t even really consider the question of how to go about it. For a while that will be all right, no great harm will be done, but eventually she’ll realize that and will feel hurt. And I don’t know what will happen then. For, soft and yielding as she is, there’s also something intemperate about her and she can take chances and damn the consequences.’

At that moment Wilke came in and told them he’d counted everything and nothing was missing; just one of the thin wine-glasses had been broken, but that had happened the previous day, when there’d been three cheers for the bride and groom—and Fräulein Hulda had clinked glasses too vigorously with Lieutenant Nienkerken.

‘Of course, always asleep, even before she played Käthchen von Heilbronn, and of course it didn’t get any better under the elder tree. A silly girl; I can’t understand Nienkerken.’

‘I can understand him perfectly.’

‘But he can’t marry her.’

‘No.’
‘So why then?’
‘That’s a big question, Luise.’

*

That was the day after the wedding. Three days later a little scribbled card arrived from Munich, the names just indicated by two letters.

‘DEAR MAMA,
Went to the Pinakothek* this morning. Geert also wanted to go across to the other one—I’ve not written the name because I’m not sure how to spell it and I don’t like to ask him. I have to say he’s very kind and patient with me and explains everything. Anyway, everything’s very beautiful, but exhausting. Things will probably ease off in Italy and get better. We’re in the *Four Seasons*,* which made Geert say it was autumn outside but with me he had spring. I found that very thoughtful. He’s very attentive anyway. Of course, I have to be that *as well*, particularly when he tells me something or explains something. He knows *everything*, so I don’t need to look anything up. He goes into raptures about you two, especially Mama. He thought Hulda was a bit affected but was very taken with old Niemeyer.
A thousand kisses from your exhilarated but rather tired Effi.’

From then on cards like that arrived every day, from Innsbruck, from Verona, from Vicenza, from Padua, each one beginning: ‘This morning we went to the famous gallery here,’ or, if it wasn’t the gallery, it was an arena or some ‘Santa Maria’ church with a name added. From Padua a proper letter came, along with the card.

‘Yesterday we were in Vicenza. You have to see Vicenza because of Palladio;* Geert told me that everything modern had its roots in him. Only modern architecture, of course. In the hotel carriage here in Padua (where we arrived this morning) he muttered “In Padua there he buried lies,”* several times and was surprised when I told him I’d never heard those words before. Finally, however, he said that actually it was good, an advantage, that I didn’t know anything about that. He’s very fair. And above all he’s really kind and patient with me and not at all superior and not at all old either. My feet are still aching and I find all the looking things up and standing for a long time very strenuous. But it has to be. I’m very much looking forward to Venice. We’re staying there for five days, perhaps a whole week. Geert has already been going on to me about the pigeons in St Mark’s Square and that you can buy bags of peas to feed the beautiful birds. There are supposed to be pictures of that, beautiful blond girls, “the same type as Hulda,” he said. Which brings the Jahnke girls back to mind. Oh, what I would give to be sitting on a cart-shaft on our farm feeding *our* pigeons. But you mustn’t kill the fantail with the big crop, I want to see him again. Oh, it’s so lovely here. They say it’s the loveliest place in the world.
Your happy but rather tired Effi.’

After she’d read the letter out, Frau von Briest said, ‘The poor child, she’s homesick.’
‘Yes,’ Briest said, ‘she’s homesick. All this confounded travelling round.’
‘Why are you saying that now? You could have prevented it. But that’s the way you are, being wise after the event. Locking the stable door after the horse has bolted.’
‘Oh, Luise, don’t go on at me like that. Effi’s our daughter, but since the 3rd of October she’s Baroness Innstetten. And if her husband, our son-in-law, wants to go on a honeymoon and take the opportunity to draw up a new catalogue of every gallery, I can’t stop him. That’s what’s called being married.’
‘So now you admit it. To me you’ve always denied, always denied, that the woman is in a situation where she has no choice.’
‘Yes, Luise, I have. But what’s the point of going into that now? It really is too big a question.’

Chapter 6

In the middle of November—they had got as far as Capri and Sorrento—Innstetten's leave ran out, and it was in his character and habits to be back on time to the day and the hour. So on the morning of the 14th he arrived in Berlin on the express, where cousin Dagobert was there to welcome him and Effi, and to suggest they should spend the two hours until the Stettin train left viewing the St Privat panorama* and then taking a light snack. Both suggestions were gratefully accepted. By midday they were back at the station, and after both Effi and Innstetten had delivered the usual invitation, that was fortunately never taken seriously, to 'come over and see us some time', they said farewell with friendly handshakes. As the train set off, Effi waved from the carriage. Then she made herself comfortable and closed her eyes, just straightening up from time to time and giving Innstetten her hand.

It was a pleasant journey, and the train arrived on time at Klein-Tantow,* from where a highway went to Kessin, that was about nine miles away. In the summer, during the holiday months, people preferred to go by water, taking an old paddle-steamer down the Kessine, a little river from which Kessin took its name; on the 1st of October, however, the *Phoenix*—of which people had long and vainly hoped it would remember its name and, when there were no passengers on board, go up in flames—stopped running, which was why Innstetten had sent a telegram to Kruse, his coachman, from Stettin: 'Klein-Tantow station five p.m. Open carriage if fine.'

And it *was* fine, and Kruse pulled up at the station with the open carriage and greeted the arrivals with the regulation formality of a baron's coachman.

'Well, Kruse, everything in order?'

'Yes, Herr Landrat.'

'Then get in please, Effi.' And while Effi was doing so and one of the station people was stowing a small suitcase with the coachman at the front, Innstetten gave instructions for the rest of their luggage to be sent on by the omnibus. Then he took his seat in the coach, asked—ingratiating himself with the locals—one of the bystanders for a light, and shouted to Kruse, 'Off we go, then, Kruse.' And off they went, over all the rails at the level-crossing, at an angle down the railway embankment, then immediately past an inn on the highway called the Prince Bismarck, since at that point the road branched, the left fork going to Varzin* and Bismarck's estate, the right to Kessin. Outside the inn was a man, broad-shouldered and of average height, wearing a fur coat and a fur cap that he took off in a very dignified manner when the Herr Landrat drove past. 'Who was that?' Effi asked. She was extremely interested in everything she could see, and therefore in the best of moods. 'He looked like a *starosta*,* though I have to admit I've never seen a *starosta* before.'

'That doesn't matter, Effi, you've hit the nail on the head. He really does look like a *starosta* and is something of the kind. He's half Polish, called Golchowski, and when we have an election or a hunt here he's really in his element. Actually he's a dubious customer I wouldn't trust an inch, and I suspect he has a lot to answer for. But he makes a great show of being loyal to the government, and when the Prince and his wife come over from Varzin he looks as if he'd like to throw himself down in front of their carriage. I know that the Prince finds him repulsive too. But what can one do? We can't fall out with him. He's got the whole area in his pocket, and there's no match for him at arranging an election. He's also said to be well off. And he lends money at usurious interest, which Poles don't normally do; in fact, the opposite as a rule.'

'But he looked good.'

'Yes, he looks good. Most of the people round here look good. A handsome type of people, but that's the most you can say about them. Your people from the Mark look more unprepossessing and morose, and they show less respect, in fact none at all, but their "yes" means yes and their "no" means no, and you can rely on them. Here everything's uncertain.'

'Why are you telling me this? I have to live among them here.'

'You won't, you won't hear or see much of them. Here town and country are very different, and you will only become acquainted with our good Kessiners.'

'Our good Kessiners. Is that ironic or are they really that good?'

'I wouldn't say they really are good, but they're different from the others; indeed, there's no similarity at all between them and the country-folk here.'

'How is that?'

'Because they're quite different people as regards both their origins and their connections. The people you will see inland from here are what are called Kashubs;* you may have heard of them, they're Slavs who've been settled here for a thousand years, probably even longer. But all those who live on the coast in the little seaports and trading towns are immigrants from far away, who have no concern for the Kashub hinterland because there's little they get from it and they're dependent on something quite different. What they're dependent on are the areas with which they trade, and since they trade the whole world over and are in contact with the whole world, you'll find people among them who come from all parts of the world. Even in our Kessin, despite the fact

that it's just a small town.'

'But that's delightful, Geert. You keep talking about a small town, and now, if you haven't been exaggerating, I'm going to find a whole new world here. All sorts of exotic things. You did mean something like that, didn't you?'

He nodded.

'A whole new world, perhaps a negro or a Turk or even a Chinaman perhaps.'

'Even a Chinaman. How good you are at guessing. It's possible we do really still have one, but at least we used to; he's dead now and buried in a little railed-off plot beside the churchyard. If you're not frightened I'll show you his grave some time; it's among the dunes, nothing but marram grass round it, a few immortelles here and there, and all the time you can hear the sea. It's very beautiful and very eerie.'

'Yes, eerie, and I'd like to know more about it. But perhaps I'd better not, after all, I always get visions and dreams, and if, as I hope, I'm fast asleep tonight, I don't want a Chinaman appearing beside my bed.'

'No, he won't do that.'

'No, he won't do that. But listen, that sounds as if it were possible. You're trying to make Kessin sound interesting, but you're going a bit too far. Are there lots of foreigners like that in Kessin?'

'A lot. The whole town consists of foreigners, people whose parents or grandparents lived somewhere else.'

'How very strange. Tell me more about it, please. But not something creepy this time. I think there's always something creepy about a Chinaman.'

'Yes, there is, isn't there,' Geert laughed. 'But all the rest are quite different, thank God, nothing but respectable people, perhaps with a bit too much of the merchant about them, a bit too much on the look-out for a profit, and always there with a dubious bill of exchange. Yes, you have to watch out with them. But otherwise very agreeable. And just to show you that I'm not pulling your leg, I'll give you a little sample, a kind of register, a list of characters.'

'Yes, Geert, do that.'

'Well, for example, not fifty yards from us—our gardens butt onto each other—there's Macpherson,* who hires out all sorts of machinery and excavators; he's a genuine Scot, a Highlander.'

'And does he wear the dress?'

'No, thank God. He's a wizened little manikin that neither his clan nor Walter Scott would be proud of. Then there's an old surgeon, Beza* by name, really he's only a barber; he's from Lisbon, the place the famous General de Meza* comes from—Meza, Beza, you can hear they're fellow countrymen. And then on the Embankment upstream—that's the quay where the boats tie up—we have a goldsmith called Stedingk, who comes from an old Swedish family; I even believe there are imperial counts of that name, and to go on, and this will be the last one on my list for the moment, there's good old Dr Hannemann, who is Danish of course, and was in Iceland for a long time and even wrote a little book about the most recent eruption of Hekla or Krabla.'

'But that's wonderful, Geert. That's like six novels, you can't even take it all in. First of all it sounds quite humdrum but then it turns out to be very special. And then, given that it's a seaport, there must be people who're not just surgeons or barbers or things like that. There must be captains here, a Flying Dutchman* or …'

'You're quite right there. We even have a captain who was a pirate with the Black Flags.'*

'Never heard of them. What are the Black Flags?'

'They're people on the other side of the world, in Tonkin and on the South Sea … But since he's back among people again he has perfect manners and is very amusing.'

'But I'd still be afraid of him.'

'Which is quite unnecessary, at any time, even when I'm out in the country or taking tea with the Prince, for, along with everything else, we've got our Rollo,* thank God …'

'Rollo?'

'Yes, Rollo. You'll be thinking, assuming you've heard about these things from Niemeyer or Jahnke, of the Norman duke, and there's something of that about our Rollo. But he's just a Newfoundland, a lovely dog that loves me and will love you, for Rollo's a connoisseur of people. And as long as you have him with you you'll be safe, and nothing will get close to you, neither living nor dead. But just look at that moon up there. Isn't it lovely?'

Effi, who was sitting there lost in thought, sat up and looked out to the right, where the moon had just risen, veiled in white cloud that was rapidly dispersing. The great copper disc was behind a copse of alders and cast its light over a wide stretch of water the Kessine formed there. Or perhaps it was already the lagoon that was fed by the open sea.

Effi was in a daze. 'Yes, you're right, Geert, it is lovely; but there's something eerie about it as well. I never had that impression in Italy, not even when we crossed from Mestre to Venice. There was water there too, and marshes and moonlight, and I thought the bridge might collapse, but it wasn't as ghostly. Why is it? Is that the Northern Lights?'

Innstetten laughed. 'We're seventy miles to the north of Hohen-Cremmen here and you'll have to wait a while before the first polar bear comes. I think it's all been too much for your nerves, the long journey and then the St Privat panorama and the story of the Chinaman.'

'But you didn't tell me the story.'

‘No, I only mentioned him. But just the mention of a Chinaman’s a story all on its own …’

‘Yes,’ she laughed.

‘And, anyway, you’ll soon be over it … Do you see that house with the light in front? That’s the smithy. The road curves there. And once we’re round the curve you’ll see the tower of Kessin or rather, both of them …’

‘It has two?’

‘Yes. Kessin’s taking off. It has a Catholic church as well now.’

*

Half-an-hour later the carriage stopped at the Landrat’s house, that was right at the other end of the town. It was a simple, rather old-fashioned half-timbered house; its façade faced the main street leading out to the bathing places, while the gable looked out on a little wood, between the town and the dunes, that they called the Plantation. This old-fashioned, half-timbered house was Innstetten’s private dwelling, not the Landrat’s office; that was on the other side of the street.

Kruse’s announcement of their arrival with three cracks of the whip was unnecessary, the occupants had long been looking out of the door and windows, and even before the carriage drew up they had all gathered on the stone threshold that took in the whole width of the pavement. Rollo was at the front, and as soon as the carriage halted he started to run round it. First of all Innstetten helped his young wife to alight, and then, giving her his arm, walked with a friendly greeting past the servants, who followed the young couple into the hall with its splendid old cupboards. The parlourmaid, a pretty woman past the first flush of youth, whose buxom figure suited her almost as well as the dainty little cap on her blond hair, helped her new mistress take off her muff and was bending down to take off her fur-lined rubber boots. But before she could do so Innstetten said, ‘It will be best if I introduce you to the whole household here, apart from Frau Kruse, who—I presume she’s with her inevitable black hen—doesn’t like to appear in public.’ They all smiled. ‘But let’s forget Frau Kruse … this here is my old Friedrich, who was already with me when I was at university … Weren’t you, Friedrich, the good old days … and this here is Johanna, a fellow countrywoman from the Mark, if you’re willing to count people from the Pasewalk area as such, and this is Christel, to whom we entrust our bodily well-being at lunchtime and in the evening and who, I can assure you, really knows how to cook. And this here is Rollo. Well, Rollo, how are things?’

Rollo seemed to have been waiting to be addressed personally, for the moment he heard his name he gave a yelp of pleasure, stood up, and put his paws on his master’s shoulders.

‘All right, Rollo, all right. But look, this is the woman; I told you about her and I told her that you were a handsome beast and would protect her.’ And now Rollo took his paws away and sat down in front of Innstetten, at the same time looking up appraisingly at the young woman. And when she held out her hand to him, he gave it a friendly lick.

During all these introductions Effi had had time to look around. She was spellbound by everything she saw and at the same time dazzled by the profusion of light.Two paraffin lamps with red shades, a wedding present from Niemeyer, were on a folding table between two oak wardrobes, in front of them the tea things with the flame under the kettle already lit. But there were many, many other things, some very strange, as well as all this. There were three beams running across the hall, dividing the ceiling up into separate sections; from the one nearest the front door a ship under full sail with a high afterdeck and gun-ports was hanging, whilst farther back a huge fish seemed to be swimming through the air. Taking her umbrella, that she was still holding, she gave the monster a gentle prod so that it started to swing slowly. ‘What is that, Geert?’ she asked.

‘That’s a shark.’

‘And what’s that right at the back there, that looks like a huge cigar outside a tobacconist’s?’

‘That’s a young crocodile. But you’ll be able to see everything better and more clearly in the morning; come, let’s have a cup of tea now. Despite all the travelling-rugs you’ll have been freezing. It was bitterly cold at the end.’

He offered Effi his arm and, while the two maids withdrew and only Friedrich and Rollo followed them, they went to the left, into the master’s living room-cum-study. Effi was just as surprised there as in the hall, but before she could say anything about it Innstetten drew back the curtain over a door beyond which there was another, larger room with a view out to the courtyard and garden.

‘So this is yours now, Effi. Friedrich and Johanna have arranged it as far as possible according to my instructions. I think it’s tolerable and I’ll be happy if you like it as well.’

She took her arm out of his and stood on tiptoe to give him a heartfelt kiss.

‘How you pamper me, poor little thing that I am. The piano there and that carpet, I think it must be Turkish, and that bowl with the fish, and then the table with those flowers. Pampering, pampering everywhere.’

‘Yes, Effi dear, that’s something you’re going to have to get used to, being young and pretty and charming, as the Kessiners must already have heard, though God knows from where. The flowers on that table at least have nothing to do with me. Where did they come from, Friedrich?’

‘From Herr Gieshübler, the chemist … There’s a card with them.’

‘Ah, Gieshübler, Alonzo Gieshübler,’* Innstetten said, handing the card with the rather foreign-sounding

Christian name to Effi with an almost unreserved laugh. ‘Gieshübler, I forgot to tell you about him—he has a doctorate, by the way, but doesn’t like people using the title, it just annoys the real doctors, he says, and he’s probably right about that. Well, I think you’ll get to know him, and that very soon; he’s a capital fellow, the best we have round here, cultured, a real character, and above all a perfect dear, which is always the main thing. But that’s enough of that, let’s sit down and drink our tea. But where? Here in your room or over there in mine? There’s no other choice. Small and cramped is my cottage.’*

Without giving the question any thought, she sat down on a little corner sofa. ‘Today we’ll stay here, today you’re my guest. Or should we do it this way: tea regularly in my room, breakfast in yours? Then each of us will have a turn, and I’m curious to know which I’m going to like best.’

‘That’s a question of morning and evening.’

‘Of course. But how it arises or, rather, how we rise to it, that’s the point.’

And she laughed and cuddled up to him and tried to kiss his hand.

‘No, Effi, for heaven’s sake, no, not like that. I don’t want to be someone who commands your respect, that’s what I am for the Kessiners. For you I’m …’

‘What, then?’

‘Oh, leave it. There’s no way I’m going to tell you that.’

Chapter 7

It was already broad daylight when Effi woke the next morning. She had difficulty finding her bearings. Where was she? Of course, in Kessin, in the house of the Landrat, von Innstetten, and she was his wife, Baroness Innstetten. Sitting up, she looked round, full of curiosity; the previous evening she'd been too tired to take in properly all the things, part strange, part old-fashioned, around her. There were two pillars supporting the ceiling beams and green curtains separated off the alcove-like bed-closet from the rest of the room; the middle curtain was missing, or had been drawn back, allowing her to orientate herself from the comfort of her bed. There, between the two windows, was the tall pier-glass, while to the right of it, against the wall separating the bedroom from the entrance hall, the big black stove towered up which (that much she had noticed the previous evening) was fuelled in the old way from outside. She could feel the heat from it pouring across the room. How lovely it was to be in your own house; she'd never felt so at ease during the whole of their trip, not even in Sorrento.

But where was Innstetten? Everything was quiet, no one around. All she could hear was the tick-tock of a little pendulum clock and now and then a dull thud from the stove, from which she assumed a few more logs were being put in from the hall. It gradually came back to mind that the previous evening Geert had talked about an electric bell that it then didn't take her long to locate; right beside her pillow was a little ivory button that she now pressed gently.

Immediately Johanna appeared. 'You rang, Madam?'

'Oh, Johanna, I think I must have overslept. It must be quite late.'

'Just struck nine.'

'And …'—she simply couldn't bring herself to say, 'my husband'—'the Master, he must have been very quiet; I didn't hear anything.'

'He definitely was. And Madam will have slept soundly. After that long journey …'

'Yes, I certainly did. And the Master, does he always get up that early?'

'Always, Ma'am. He's very strict about that; he can't bear sleeping in, and when he goes to his room the stove must be warm and his coffee mustn't be long in coming either.'

'So he's already had his breakfast?'

'Oh, no, Ma'am … the Master …'

Effi sensed that she shouldn't have asked that, shouldn't have suggested that Innstetten might not have waited for her. She felt she ought to make up for her mistake, as far as possible, and once she was out of bed and sitting at the mirror she took up the conversation again and said, 'And the Master's right. Early to rise, that was the rule in my parents' house. When people sleep until late in the morning the whole day's topsy-turvy. But he won't be so severe on me. I couldn't get to sleep for quite a while last night and I was even a little frightened.'

'What a thing to say, Ma'am! What was it?'

'There was a very odd noise above me. At first it sounded like long dresses with trains dragging across the floorboards, and I was so worked up I thought I could see little white satin shoes a couple of times. It was as if people were dancing upstairs, but very quietly.'

While she was saying this, Johanna kept looking over the young woman's shoulder at the high, narrow mirror in order to be able to observe Effi's expression better. Then she said, 'Yes, that's the upstairs chamber. We used to hear it in the kitchen as well. But we don't any more, we've got used to it.'

'Is there anything special about it?'

'Oh, God forbid, no. For a while we couldn't really say where it came from and the Pastor looked embarrassed, even though Dr Gieshübler just laughed. But now we know it's the curtains. The chamber's a bit musty and mouldy, so the windows are always left open, except when there happens to be a storm blowing. So there's almost always a strong draught there and the old white curtains, that are much too long anyway, sweep back and forward across the floorboards. It sounds like silk dresses or satin shoes, as Madam just said.'

'Of course it'll be that. But I don't understand why the curtains haven't been taken down. Or they could be shortened. It's such a strange noise, it gets on your nerves. But now get that little cloth, Johanna, and dab my forehead. Or, no, get the cologne spray out of my suitcase … Oh, that's lovely, that is refreshing. Now I'll go through. He's still here, isn't he, or has he gone out already?'

'The Master has been out already, over in the office, I think. But he's been back for a quarter of an hour now. I'll tell Friedrich he can bring breakfast.'

With that Johanna left the room and Effi, after another glance in the mirror, went across the entrance hall, that had lost a lot of the previous evening's magic in the light of day, to Geert's room.

He was sitting at his roll-top desk. It was rather cumbersome, but he was attached to it as it came from the family home. Effi stood behind him and embraced and kissed him before he could get up from his chair.

'Already?'

‘Already you say. Just to make fun of me, of course.’

Innstetten shook his head. ‘Why would I do that?’ But Effi was enjoying accusing herself and refused to accept that his ‘already’ wasn’t meant ironically. ‘You must remember from our journey that I never kept you waiting in the morning. During the day, well, yes, but that’s different. It’s true that I’m not very punctual, but I’m not a late riser. In that respect I think my parents brought me up very well.’

‘In that respect? In all respects, my sweet little Effi.’

‘You’re just saying that because it’s still our honeymoon … but no, we’re past that now. Good heavens, Geert, I’ve only just realized that we’ve already been married for over six weeks, for six weeks and a day. Ah, now that is different; in that case I don’t look on it as flattery, I look on it as the truth.’

At that moment Friedrich came in, bringing the coffee. The breakfast table was placed diagonally in front of a little, right-angled sofa that filled one corner of the room. They both sat down there.

‘The coffee’s excellent,’ Effi said, at the same time examining the room and furnishings. ‘That’s hotel coffee or like what we had at Bottegone* … you remember, in Florence, with a view of the cathedral. I must tell Mama about it when I write to her, we don’t have coffee like this in Hohen-Cremmen. And anyway, Geert, now I can see what a superior household I’ve married into. At home everything just gets done any old way.’

‘Don’t be silly, Effi. I’ve never seen a better-run household than yours.’

‘And then your house. When Papa bought himself a new rifle cabinet and hung a buffalo head over his desk with a portrait of Wrangel* underneath it (he’d been the old man’s adjutant) I thought what he’d done was marvellous; but compared with what I see when I look round here, all the glories of Hohen-Cremmen are just paltry and ordinary. I don’t know what to compare all this with; only yesterday evening, when I just gave it a cursory glance, all kinds of thoughts came to me.’

‘What thoughts, if I may ask?’

‘Yes, what thoughts? But you mustn’t laugh at them. I once had a picture-book with a Persian or Indian prince (he was wearing a turban) sitting cross-legged on a red silk cushion, and behind him there was a big roll of silk as well, billowing out on either side, and the wall behind the Indian prince was bristling with swords and daggers, with leopard-skins and shields and long Turkish rifles. That’s just what it looks like here, and if you cross your legs the similarity will be complete.’

‘Effi, you’re a delightful, darling creature. You’ve no idea how much I think that, and how I’d like to show you all the time that I think that.’

‘Well, there’s plenty of time for that; I’m only seventeen and don’t intend to die just yet.’

‘Not before I do, at the very least. Of course, were I to die I’d most like to take you with me. I don’t want to leave you to anyone else; what do you say to that?’

‘I’ll have to think about that. Or, rather, let’s just forget it. I don’t like talking about death, I’m all for life. On the way here you told me all sorts of strange things about the town and the countryside. I can see that everything here’s different from in Hohen-Cremmen and Schwantikow, but in your “good old Kessin”, as you keep on calling it, we must have some social life. Are there our kind of people in the town?’

‘No, Effi dear; in that respect you’re going to be very disappointed. There are a few noble families in the vicinity whom you will get to know, but nothing at all in the town.’

‘Nothing at all? I can’t believe that. There are three thousand people here, and among those three thousand there must be, apart from ordinary people like Beza the barber (that was his name, wasn’t it?), an elite, notables, that kind of thing.’

Innstetten laughed. ‘Yes, notables, we have some of those. But when you have a good look at them, they don’t amount to much. We have a pastor, of course, and a district judge and a headmaster and a pilot commander, in all there must be a dozen such people with official positions, but most of them are, as the saying goes, good people but poor musicians.* And all that leaves is just consuls.’*

‘Just consuls. Oh, come now, Geert, how can you say “just consuls”? Consul, that’s something very high, very great, I’d almost say something awesome, they’re the people carrying the bundles of rods with, I think, an axe sticking out.’

‘Not quite, Effi. They’re called lictors.’

‘That’s right, they’re called lictors. But consuls, that’s also something very grand to do with the law. Brutus was a consul.’

‘Yes, Brutus was a consul. But ours aren’t at all like him, all they do is deal in sugar and coffee, or break open a crate of oranges and sell them to you at ten pfennigs each.’

‘That’s not possible.’

‘It’s certain, even. They’re sharp little merchants who give advice to foreign ships that arrive here and don’t know how to sort out some commercial matter, and when they’ve given this advice and assisted some Dutch or Portuguese ship they eventually become the accredited representatives of those foreign states, with the result that here in Kessin we have just as many consuls as they have ambassadors in Berlin, and when there’s some special day, and there are lots of those here, all the flags are raised, and if it’s a morning with bright sunshine you’ll see the flags of the whole of Europe flying from our roofs, and the Stars and Stripes and the Chinese dragon as well.’

‘You’re in the mood for mockery this morning, Geert. You may well be right, but I for my part, simple young

woman that I am, have to admit that I find all that delightful, and our towns in the Havelland are nothing compared to it. When they celebrate the Emperor's birthday it's always just black-and-white flags,* with at most a little bit of red here and there, but that's no comparison with the world of flags you've told me about. Anyway, as I've already said, I keep finding that there's something foreign in everything here, and so far there's nothing I've heard or seen that I haven't found in a way amazing, that strange ship in the hall yesterday evening with the shark and the crocodile behind it, and your own room here. Everything so oriental and, I repeat, like some Indian prince's …'

'If you insist. Congratulations, Princess …'

'And then that upper chamber with the long curtains that sweep over the floorboards.'

'But what do you know about the upper chamber, Effi?'

'Nothing apart from what I've just told you. I woke up during the night, and for what must have been an hour it seemed as if I could hear shoes sliding across the ground, and as if people were dancing and almost like music as well. But all very quiet. And I told Johanna about it this morning, just as an excuse for sleeping in so long. And she then said it came from the long curtains in the upper chamber. I think we should simply cut something off the curtains, or at least close the windows; the weather's going to be pretty stormy soon anyway. The middle of November's the time for that.'

Innstetten stared into space, slightly embarrassed, apparently unsure whether to reply to all this. Eventually he decided not to go into it. 'You're right, Effi, we'll shorten the long curtains up there. But there's no hurry, especially since it's not certain it'll make any difference. It could be something else, in the chimney, or woodworm, or a polecat. We do have polecats here. But before we start making changes you must have a look round at the way things are in the house, under my guidance, of course; it'll only take us a quarter of an hour. And then you must get dressed up, just a little bit, you're at your most charming as you are—get dressed up for our friend Gieshübler; it's past ten now, and if I know him he'll report here at eleven, or at the latest midday, to lay his most humble respects at your feet. That, you see, is the kind of language he indulges in. For all that he is, as I told you, an excellent fellow who will become your friend, if I know anything about you and him.'

Chapter 8

It was well past eleven, but Gieshübler had still not arrived. ‘I can’t wait any longer,’ Geert had said, ‘duty calls. If Gieshübler does come, be as accommodating as you can and everything will be fine. He mustn’t feel embarrassed, once he’s confused he can find it impossible to get a word out, or he says the strangest things; but if you can gain his confidence and get him in a good mood he can talk the hind legs off a donkey. You’ll manage that, I’m sure. Don’t expect me back before three, there’s all sorts of things I have to do over there. As for the room upstairs, we’ll think about that; it’ll probably be best if we leave things as they are.’

With that Innstetten went and left his young wife by herself. She sat, leaning back slightly, in a snug corner by the window, supporting herself, as she looked out, with her left arm on a little shelf that had been drawn out of the roll-top desk. The street was the main way to the beach, which meant there was plenty going on there in the summer but now, in the middle of November, it was empty and quiet, and just a few poor children, whose parents lived in some thatched houses on the edge of the Plantation, clattered past the Innstettens’ house in their wooden clogs. But Effi was unaffected by this solitude, for her imagination was still occupied with the strange things she’d just seen on her tour of inspection round the house. The inspection had started with the kitchen that had a modern stove and an electric cable running across the ceiling, going as far as the maid’s room —both only recently installed. Effi had been pleased when Innstetten told her about these improvements, but then they had gone into the hall and from there out into the courtyard, the nearer part of which wasn’t much more than a fairly narrow passageway between two wings. These wings housed everything appertaining to the management of the household: on the right the maid’s room, the servant’s room, the scullery, on the left the Kruses’ flat between the stable and the coach-house. The chickens were kept in a shed above the Kruses’, and there was a flap in the roof of the stable allowing the pigeons to fly in and out. Effi had looked at all this with interest, but that interest was nothing compared with what she felt when, going back into the house, Innstetten led the way up the stairs. They were crooked and dark; the landing to which they led, on the other hand, was almost cheerful, since it had plenty of light and enjoyed a good view out over the countryside: on the one side, of a Dutch windmill high on one of the dunes beyond the Plantation and the roofs at the edge of the town; on the other side, of the Kessine that here, immediately before it joined the sea, was pretty wide and imposing. It made an impression that couldn’t be ignored, and Effi hadn’t hesitated to express her pleasure in it. ‘Yes, very beautiful, very picturesque,’ was all Innstetten had said in reply, and then opened some rather crooked double doors on the right that led into the so-called upper chamber. This took in the whole of that storey; the front and back windows were open and the aforementioned curtains were flapping to and fro in the strong draught. A chimney with a large stone slab jutted out from one of the long walls, while there were a few tin lamps on the wall opposite, each with two openings, just as in the hall below, but all tarnished and uncared-for. Effi was somewhat disappointed and said so, declaring that instead of the shabby, desolate chamber she’d rather see the rooms on the other side of the landing. ‘They’re really nothing at all,’ Innstetten had replied, but still opened the doors. There were four one-windowed rooms, all painted yellow, like the chamber, and equally empty. Only in the one there were three wicker chairs with the seats worn through, and a little picture, half the length of a finger, had been stuck on the arm of one; it represented a Chinaman, in a blue coat with baggy yellow pantaloons and a flat hat on his head. Effi looked at it and said, ‘What’s the Chinaman doing here?’ Innstetten seemed surprised by the picture himself and assured her he knew nothing about it. ‘Christel will have stuck it there, or Johanna. Just for fun. You can see it’s been cut out of a children’s picture-book.’ Effi thought so too, and was only puzzled that Innstetten took it all so seriously, as if there were something to it after all. After that she’d had another look at the chamber and said what a pity it was that it was all so empty. ‘We only have three rooms downstairs, and if someone comes to visit us we won’t know what to do with them. Don’t you think we could make two nice guest-rooms out of the chamber? That would be something for Mama; she could sleep at the back and she’d have the view of the river and the two breakwaters, and in front there’d be the town and the Dutch windmill. In Hohen-Cremmen we still have just a post windmill. Come on, tell me what you think of that? I imagine Mama will be visiting us next May.’

Innstetten agreed to everything and finally said, ‘That’s all very well, but I think that after all it will be better if we put your Mama up across the road in the Landrat’s office; the whole of the first floor’s empty there, just as it is here, and she’d have more space to herself over there.’

*

That was the result of the first tour of the house; then Effi had made herself presentable, though not quite as quickly as Innstetten had assumed, and now she was sitting in her husband’s room, her thoughts occupied alternately with the little Chinaman upstairs and Gieshübler, who still hadn’t arrived. A quarter of an hour ago a little gentleman with shoulders so crooked he was almost deformed, and wearing a short, elegant fur coat and a high top-hat brushed very smooth, had walked past on the other side of the street and looked across at her

window. But that couldn't have been Herr Gieshübler! No, the man with the crooked shoulders, who at the same time had something so distinguished about him, must have been the high-court judge, and she recalled actually seeing one at a soirée of her Aunt Therese's, until she suddenly remembered that Kessin only had a district court.

While she was still pursuing these reflections their subject, who had clearly just been taking a morning stroll —or plucking up his courage—round the Plantation, came into view again, and one minute later Friedrich appeared to announce Herr Doktor Gieshübler, the chemist.

'Show him in, please.'

The poor young woman's heart was pounding. It was the first time she had to appear as the lady of the house, and as the first lady of the town at that.

Having helped Gieshübler out of his fur coat, Friedrich opened the door again.

Effi held out her hand to the man as he came in, looking embarrassed, and he grasped and kissed it with some fervour. The young woman seemed to have made a great and immediate impression on him.

'My husband has already told me … but I'm receiving you in his room … he's over in the office and can be back any moment … May I ask you to be so good as to come to my room?'

Gieshübler followed Effi as she led the way to the neighbouring room and pointed to one of the armchairs, sitting down on the sofa herself. 'I'm delighted to have the opportunity to tell you what pleasure your lovely flowers and your card gave me yesterday. I immediately stopped feeling a stranger here, and when I told Innstetten that, he said we were sure to be good friends.'

'He said that, did he? The Herr Landrat is very kind. Yes, the Herr Landrat and you, Frau Baronin, there are two dear people who have come together, if you will allow me to say so. For what your husband is like I know, and what you are like, Frau Baronin, I can see.'

'I only hope you're not looking on me with too kindly an eye. I'm so very young, and young people …'

'Oh, my dear Madam, say nothing against young people. With all their faults, young people are still fine and charming, and old people, for all their virtues, are not up to much. Though in fact I'm not qualified to say much about this from personal experience; about being old, yes, but not about being young, for I've never really been young. People like me never are young. And that, I think I may say, is the saddest aspect of the whole business. You lack real courage, you have no confidence in yourself, you hardly dare ask a lady to dance because you want to save her the embarrassment, and so the years pass and you grow old and your life has been poor and empty.'

Effi took his hand. 'Oh, you mustn't say things like that. We women aren't that bad.'

'Oh no, certainly not …'

'And when I think back', Effi went on, 'to all the experiences I've had … they don't amount to a lot, since I haven't got round very much and have always lived out in the country … then it seems to me that we like what is likeable. And I can see at once that you're different from other people, we women have a sharp eye for that. Perhaps your name is part of that, in your case. That was something our old Pastor Niemeyer used to maintain; there was, he used to say, something mysteriously defining about a name, especially a person's Christian name, and for me Alonzo Gieshübler opens up a whole new world, yes, I'd almost say, if you'll allow, that Alonzo is a romantic name; it comes in *Preziosa*.'[*]

Gieshübler smiled with a quite uncommon feeling of pleasure, and found the courage to put down the top-hat, that was much too tall in relation to its owner and that he'd been holding in his hand until then. 'Yes, my dear lady, you're quite right there.'

'Oh, I understand. I've heard about all these consuls there are supposed to be in Kessin, and I suspect your father met the daughter of a seafaring *capitano* in the house of the Spanish consul, some beautiful woman from Andalusia, I assume. Women from Andalusia are always beautiful.'

'You assume quite correctly, my dear Madam. And my mother truly was a beautiful woman, poor proof of it that I am. But she was still alive when your husband came here three years ago, and still had her fiery looks. He will confirm what I've just said. Personally I'm more of a Gieshübler, their looks aren't much but they're a respectable family. We've been here for four generations now, a good hundred years, and if there were a nobility for chemists …'

'You would belong to it. And I, for my part, take it as proven, and even as proven without qualification. That is easiest for us who come from the old families, because we—at least this is how I was brought up by my father, and by my mother too—are happy to acknowledge any true way of thinking, whoever it comes from. I was born a Briest and I'm descended from the Briest who, on the day before the Battle of Fehrbellin,[*] carried out the attack on Rathenow that you have perhaps heard of …'

'Oh, certainly, Frau Baronin, that's my speciality.'

'So I'm a Briest. And my father, it must have been more than a hundred times he's said to me, Effi (that's what I'm called), Effi, this is where it is, *here*, and when Froben[*] swapped his horse for the Elector's, he belonged to the nobility, and when Luther[*] said "Here I stand," he truly did belong to the nobility. And I think Innstetten, Herr Gieshübler, was quite right when he assured me that we would be good friends.'

What Gieshübler would now most have liked to do would have been to make a declaration of love and ask to be allowed to fight and die for her, as El Cid or some other *campeador*. Since all of that was out of the question,

and his heart could stand it no longer, he stood up, looked for his hat, that he fortunately found, and, after kissing her hand once more, quickly withdrew without uttering another word.

Chapter 9

Such was Effi's first day in Kessin. Innstetten allowed her half a week to give her time to get settled in and write her various letters to Hohen-Cremmen, to her Mama, to Hulda and the twins; but then the visits in the town had to begin, some of which were made (unusually, but it happened to be raining, so it was permissible) in a closed carriage. Once they were completed, it was the turn of the gentry in the surrounding countryside. That took longer since, given the distances, mostly only a single visit could be made on any one day. First they went to the Borckes* in Rothenmoor, then to Morgnitz, Dabergotz, and Kroschentin, where they made duty-calls on the Ahlemanns, Jatzkows, and Grasenabbs.* A few further visits came later, including one to old Baron Güldenklee* in Papenhagen. The impression they made on Effi was the same everywhere: mediocre people, mostly of dubious friendliness, who, while pretending to talk about Bismarck and the Crown Princess,* were actually just scrutinizing Effi's outfit, that some thought too pretentious for such a young lady and others too showy for a lady of standing. In everything, they told each other, you could see the influence of Berlin: a penchant for outward appearances, and remarkable embarrassment and uncertainty when it came to dealing with big questions. At the Borckes' in Rothenmoor, and the families in Morgnitz and Dabergotz as well, she was adjudged to be 'afflicted with rationalism', at the Grasenabbs' in Kroschentin, however, she was immediately declared an 'atheist'. Old Frau von Grasenabb, a south German (née Stiefel von Stiefelstein),* did at least make a feeble attempt to rescue Effi as a deist; however, Sidonie von Grasenabb, an old maid of forty-three, had brusquely broken in, 'Simply an atheist I tell you, Mother, not one iota less, and that's that,' at which the old woman, who was afraid of her own daughter, held her tongue.

*

The whole round had lasted more or less two weeks, and it was the 2nd of December and already late in the day when they returned to Kessin from the final visit. That had been to the Güldenklees in Papenhagen, and Innstetten had found it impossible to avoid having a political discussion with old Güldenklee. 'Yes, my dear Landrat, when I think how times have changed. A whole generation ago, or something like that, there was another 2nd of December,* and Louis, Napoleon's nephew—*if* that's what he was and he didn't come from somewhere quite different—fired grapeshot on the Paris mob. Well, we can forgive him that, he was the right fellow for that kind of thing, and I stick by the motto, "Every man does as well or as badly as he deserves." But losing all sense of proportion later on and picking a quarrel out of the blue with *us* in '70, well, Baron, that was, how shall I put it, that was an impertinence. And he paid for it. The old man up there won't be mocked, *he's* on our side.'

'Yes,' Innstetten said, being sensible enough to appear to take that kind of blinkered nationalism seriously. 'The hero and conqueror of Saarbrücken* didn't know what he was doing. But you mustn't judge him too harshly as a person. After all, who was master in his house? No one. I'm already preparing to put the reins in other hands myself, and Louis Napoleon, well, he was putty in the hands of his Catholic—or should we say Jesuit—wife.'

'Putty in the hands of his wife, who then cocked a snook at him. Of course he was *that*, Innstetten. But surely you're not saying this to try and rescue the reputation of that marionette? History has pronounced its verdict on him. Though in fact it has never been proved'—as he spoke, his eye somewhat anxiously sought that of his better half—'whether petticoat government can't actually be seen as something positive; always assuming the woman's right for it, of course. But who was this woman? She wasn't a woman at all, at best she was a lady, and that tells us everything; when you say "lady" the word always smacks of something else. This Eugénie*—I'll pass over her relationship with that Jewish banker, I can't stand arrogant moralizers—had something of the cabaret artiste about her, and if the city where she lived was Babylon, then she was the woman of Babylon. I won't put it any more clearly than that, for I know'—he bowed to Effi—'what is due to German women. And please forgive me, dear Madam, for even having touched on these matters in your presence at all.'

Such had been the way the conversation had gone, after they'd talked about the elections, Nobiling's attempt* on the Emperor's life, and the price of oilseed rape, and now Innstetten and Effi were back home chatting for half an hour. The two housemaids were already in bed, for it was close on midnight.

Innstetten, in a smoking jacket and morocco-leather slippers, was walking up and down; Effi was still in her formal attire, fan and gloves beside her.

'Yes,' Innstetten said, coming to a halt, 'I think this is a day we really ought to celebrate, though how I couldn't say. Should I play you a victory march or set the shark out there swinging or carry you across the hall in triumph? Something ought to happen for, as I'm sure you're aware, that was our last visit.'

'It was, thank God,' Effi said. 'But the feeling that we shall have some peace and quiet from now on is, I think, celebration enough. You could give me a kiss, though, but that never occurs to you. Not a single caress on all that long way, you just sat there, cold as a snowman. Puffing away at your cigar.'

‘That’s enough of that, I’ll mend my ways soon enough, what I want to know at the moment is what you think about the whole question of the people with whom we should mix. Do you feel attracted to one or other of the families? Have the Borckes defeated the Grasenabbs or vice versa, or do you go for old Güldenklee? What he said about Eugénie sounded very noble and pure.’

‘Well, well, Herr von Innstetten, you can be catty too. That’s quite a different Geert from the one I know.’

‘And if the local gentry aren’t up to it,’ Innstetten went on unperturbed, ‘how do you feel about the notables here in Kessin? How do you feel about the Club? That, when it comes down to it, is the vital question. Recently I saw you chatting to our reserve-lieutenant district judge, a neat little man one could perhaps get on with, if only he would abandon the idea that it was his appearance on the flank that led to the capture of Le Bourget.* And his wife! She’s supposed to be the best player of boston* and also has the prettiest chips. But again, Effi, how are things going to be in Kessin? Will you settle in? Will you become a popular figure and secure me a majority if I want to get into the Reichstag? Or are you in favour of the life of a recluse, of shutting yourself off from Kessin society, both town and country?’

‘I’ll probably go for the life of a recluse, if the Moor Pharmacy doesn’t draw me out of it. In which case I’ll probably sink even lower in Sidonie’s estimation, but I’ll just have to accept that; it’s a battle that still has to be fought. I put everything on Gieshübler. It does sound a bit odd, but he really is the only person worth talking to, the only real human being here.’

‘He is that,’ Innstetten said. ‘How good you are at choosing!’

‘Would I have got you otherwise?’ Effi said, clinging on to his arm.

*

That was on the 2nd of December. One week later Bismarck was in Varzin, and Innstetten knew that until Christmas and perhaps beyond the quiet days were over for him.

The Prince had a liking for him that went back to the time when they had both been in Versailles, and frequently invited him to dine when he had visitors, but also by himself, for the youthful Landrat, with his presence and intelligence, was also a favourite of the Princess.

The first invitation came on the fourteenth. Snow was lying, so Innstetten decided to do the almost two-hour journey to the station by sleigh; from there it was an hour by train to Varzin. ‘Don’t wait up for me, Effi. I won’t be back before midnight; it’ll probably be two or even later. But I won’t disturb you. Farewell, I’ll see you tomorrow morning.’ And with that he got into the sleigh and the two dun Graditzers* flew off through the town and then out into the country, heading for the station.

That was their first long separation, almost twelve hours. Poor Effi. How should she spend the evening? Early to bed, that was dangerous, then she would wake up and not be able to get back to sleep again, listening for every sound. No, first of all get really tired and then sleep soundly, that was best. She wrote a letter to her Mama and then went to see Frau Kruse, for whose melancholia—she often sat late into the night with the black hen in her lap—she felt great sympathy. But not for one moment did the woman sitting still in her overheated room, silently brooding, respond to the friendly gesture, so that Effi, as soon as she realized her visit was felt more as a disturbance than as something to be enjoyed, left again, merely asking if there was anything she could get the poor woman. She, however, refused the offer.

By now it was evening and the lamp was already on. Effi stood at the window of her room and looked out at the little wood, the branches glittering with snow. She was quite engrossed by the scene and didn’t concern herself with what was happening in the room behind her. When she looked round again she saw that Friedrich had softly and silently laid the table by the sofa. ‘Oh yes, supper … I suppose I’ll have to sit down.’ But she found she just didn’t have the appetite for it, so she got up and read through the letter she’d written to her Mama again. If she’d felt lonely before, she now felt twice as lonely. What wouldn’t she have given for the two Jahnke redheads to come in, or even Hulda. She was always so sentimental, of course, and mostly preoccupied with her triumphs, but however dubious those triumphs were, at that moment Effi would have been happy to listen to her telling her about them. Finally she opened the lid of the piano in order to play; but that didn’t work. ‘No, that would make me completely melancholy; better to read.’ So she looked for a book. The first that came to hand was a fat tome, an old travel guide, perhaps from Innstetten’s days as a lieutenant. ‘Yes, that’s what I’ll read; there’s nothing more calming than that kind of book. The dangerous parts are always just the maps, but never fear, I’ll make sure I avoid that tiny print that I hate.’ So she opened the book at random: page 153. From the next room she could hear the tick-tock of the clock, and from outside Rollo who, once it was dark, had abandoned his place in the coach-house and, as on every evening, stretched out on the large, woven mat outside the bedroom. The awareness that he was near lessened her feeling of abandonment, indeed, she almost felt in good spirits again and so immediately started to read. The page the book happened to be open at dealt with the Hermitage, the well-known Margrave’s palace near Bayreuth;* that attracted her, Bayreuth, Richard Wagner, and so she read on: ‘One further picture in the Hermitage deserves mention, if not for its beauty then for its age and the figure it represents. It is a female portrait, very much darkened, a small head with severe, slightly sinister features and a ruff that looks as if it is carrying the head. Some maintain it is an old margravine from the end of the fifteenth century, others are of the opinon that it is Countess Orlamünde; both,

however, agree that it is the portrait of the lady who since then has achieved a certain notoriety in the history of the Hohenzollerns under the name of the “white woman”.’*

‘Well, I really happened on the right thing, didn’t I?’ Effi said, pushing the book to one side. ‘I want to calm my nerves, and the first thing I read is the story of the “white woman” I’ve been afraid of for as long as I can remember. However, since I’ve got the creeps already, I might as well read it right through.’

She opened the book again and read on, ‘… and precisely this old portrait (the *original* of which plays an important role in the history of the Hohenzollerns) plays a role as a *picture* in the history of Hermitage Palace itself, which is probably connected with the fact that it is hung on a concealed door, not visible to outsiders, behind which there is a staircase coming up from the basement. It is said that when Napoleon spent the night there, the “white woman” came out of the frame and walked towards his bed. The Emperor, starting in horror, called his adjutant, and to the end of his life used to talk indignantly of that “maudit château”.’*

‘I’ll have to give up trying to calm myself down with this sort of reading,’ Effi said. ‘If I go on I’m sure to come to a dungeon where the devil rode off on a wine barrel. I believe there’s a lot of that kind of thing in Germany, and a travel guide has to gather it all together. I think instead I’ll close my eyes and try to remember my eve-of-wedding party: the twins who couldn’t carry on for tears, and Cousin Dagobert who, when all the others were looking at each other in embarrassment, declared in astonishingly dignified tones that tears like that opened up the gates of paradise for one. He really was charming and so full of high spirits … And now me! And here of all places. Oh, I’m not fitted to be a grand lady. Mama, yes, she would have been in the right place here, she would have set the tone, as is right and proper for the Landrat’s wife, and Sidonie Grasenabb would have been all deference and not particularly concerned about her belief or unbelief. But me … I’m a child, and that’s what I’ll probably stay. I once heard it said that that was a piece of good fortune, but I don’t know if it’s true. You always have to fit in where you happen to be put.’

At that point Friedrich came in to clear the table.

‘What’s the time, Friedrich?’

‘Coming up to nine, Madam.’

‘Well thank God for that. Send Johanna in.’

*

‘Madam sent for me.’

‘Yes, Johanna. I’m going to go to bed. It’s actually still early, but I’m so alone. Please put the letter in with the post first, and when you’re back I suppose it’ll be time. And even if it isn’t.’

Effi took the lamp and went across to her bedroom. Yes, there lying on the rush mat was Rollo. When he saw Effi coming, he stood up to make room for her and brushed against her hand with his ear. Then he lay down again.

In the meantime Johanna had gone across to the Landrat’s office to put the letter in with the post there. She hadn’t particularly hurried while she was doing this, instead she’d had a chat with Frau Paaschen, the wife of the clerk. About the Landrat’s young wife, of course.

‘What’s she like?’ Frau Paaschen asked.

‘She’s very young.’

‘Well there’s nothing wrong with that, the opposite, rather. The young ones, and that’s the good thing about them, spend all their time in front of the mirror primping and preening themselves and don’t see or hear much, and they’re not the kind who’re always counting the candle-ends in the hall and don’t object if someone gives you a kiss just because they never get any.’

‘Yes,’ Johanna said, ‘that’s what my old mistress was like, even though she had no reason to be. But there’s nothing of that in our mistress.’

‘Is she very affectionate, then?’

‘Oh, very much so, as you can well imagine.’

‘But then he leaves her alone like this …’

‘Yes, Paaschen, but you mustn’t forget … the Prince. And then, he is the Landrat after all. And perhaps he’s set his sights on higher things.’

‘I’m sure he has. And he will get there. There is something about him. Paaschen’s always saying that, and he understands people.’

Johanna’s errand to the office must have taken a quarter of an hour, and when she came back Effi was already sitting at the mirror, waiting.

‘You took a long time, Johanna.’

‘Yes, Ma’am … You must excuse me … I met Frau Paaschen over there and I got caught up a little. It’s so quiet here, you’re always glad when you meet someone you can have a bit of a chat with. Christel’s a very nice person but she doesn’t talk, and Friedrich’s so dozy and so cautious and won’t really say much. Of course, there are times when you have to know how to hold your tongue, and Frau Paaschen, she’s so nosey and so common, not really my taste, but it’s good to hear and see something now and then.’

Effi sighed. ‘Yes, Johanna, that’s best …’

‘Madam has such lovely hair, so long and silky soft.’

‘Yes, it’s very soft. But that’s not a good thing, Johanna. The way your hair is, so’s your character.’

‘True, Ma’am. And a soft character’s better than a hard one. I’ve got soft hair too.’

‘Yes, Johanna. And your hair’s blond as well. That’s what men like best.’

‘Oh, that varies a lot, Ma’am. There are some who go for dark hair as well.’

‘Of course,’ Effi laughed, ‘I’ve found that too. There will probably be something else behind it. But women who are blond always have a fair complexion, you have, Johanna, and I’m willing to bet you get lots of men after you. I’m still very young but I know about that too. And then I have a friend, she was blond as well, even blonder than you, really flaxen, and she was a pastor’s daughter …’

‘Oh, in that case …’

‘Oh, come on, Johanna, what do you mean by “Oh, in that case”. It sounds quite strange and suggestive, I’m sure you can’t have anything against pastor’s daughters … She was a very pretty girl, even our officers thought that—where we lived there were officers around, and red hussars at that—and she knew how to make the most of it: a black velvet bodice and a flower, a rose or a heliotrope, and if she hadn’t had such large, protuberant eyes … oh, you should have seen them, Johanna, at least this big’—and with a laugh Effi pulled her right eyelid down—‘she would have been a real beauty. She was called Hulda, Hulda Niemeyer, and we weren’t even really that close; but if she were here now, sitting there on the little corner sofa, I’d chat to her till midnight, or even longer. I’ve such a yearning, and …’ as she said this, she drew Johanna’s head close to her, ‘I’m so afraid.’

‘Oh, you’ll get over it, Ma’am, we’ve all felt that.’

‘You’ve all felt that? What is that supposed to mean, Johanna?’

‘ … And if Madam really is that afraid, I can bed down here. I’ll use the straw mat and lay a chair down for a headrest and sleep here till the morning, or until the Master’s back.’

‘He’s not going to disturb me, he promised me that.’

‘Or I’ll just sit on the corner sofa.’

‘Yes, that might be alright. But then, no, it won’t. The Master mustn’t know I’m afraid, he doesn’t like that. He always wants me to be brave and resolute, the way he is. But I just can’t manage it, I was always a little timorous … But I can see I’ll have to make an effort and comply with his wishes in such matters … and then I have Rollo, of course. He’s lying across the threshold.’

Johanna nodded at everything she said, and then lit the candle on Effi’s bedside table. Then she took the lamp. ‘Is there anything else Madam requires?’

‘No, Johanna. The shutters are properly fastened?’

‘Just pulled to, Madam. Otherwise it’s very dark and stuffy.’

‘That’s alright.’

And now Johanna left; Effi went over to her bed and wrapped herself up in the blankets.

She left the candle burning because she didn’t want to go to sleep straight away; rather, she intended, as she had previously with her eve-of-wedding party, to think about the honeymoon and go through everything again in her mind’s eye. But things turned out differently, and when she was in Verona,* looking for Juliet’s house, her eyes were already closing. The stub of the candle in the little silver candlestick gradually burnt down, then flickered up and went out.

For a while Effi slept soundly. But all at once she woke from her sleep with a loud cry—indeed, she heard the cry herself and also Rollo barking outside; ‘woof, woof’ echoed down the corridor, a hollow sound, almost as if he were afraid himself. She felt as if her heart were standing still; she found it impossible to call out, and just then something scurried past her and the door out into the corridor flew open. But that moment of intense fear was also the one that freed her from it for, instead of some horror, it was Rollo who now came to her, his head searching for her hand, and, once he’d found it, he lay down on the rug beside her bed. But with her other hand Effi had already pressed the button of the bell three times, and less than thirty seconds later Johanna was there, barefoot, her coat over her arm and a large checkered scarf round her head and shoulders.

‘Thank God you’re here, Johanna.’

‘What was it, Ma’am? Madam must have been dreaming.’

‘Yes, dreaming. It must have been something like that … but there was something else as well.’

‘What, Ma’am?’

‘I was fast asleep and suddenly I woke up with a scream … perhaps it was a nightmare … they do run in the family, my Papa gets them too and frightens us with them, only Mama always says he should have more self-control; but that’s easily said … So I woke with a start and screamed, and as I was looking round, as far as that was possible in the darkness, something brushed past my bed, just there, where you’re standing, Johanna, and then it was gone. And when I ask myself what it was …’

‘Well what was it, Ma’am?’

‘And when I ask myself what it was … I don’t like to say it, Johanna … but I think it was the Chinaman.’

‘The one from upstairs?’ Johanna tried to laugh. ‘The little Chinaman that Christel and I stuck to the arm of that chair? Oh, Madam will have been dreaming, and even if you were awake, all that will have come from your dream.’

‘I’d gladly believe it. But it was exactly the same moment as when Rollo barked outside, so he must have seen

it too, then the door flew open and the dear, brave thing came bounding towards me, as if he were coming to save me. Oh, my dear Johanna, it was terrible. And me all alone, and so young. Oh, if only I had someone here whose shoulder I could cry on. But so far from home … Oh, from home …'

'The Master might come back any moment.'

'No, he mustn't come, he mustn't see me like this. He might laugh at me, and I could never forgive him that. It was so horrible, Johanna … You must stay here now … But let Christel and Friedrich sleep on. No one must know.'

'Or perhaps I could fetch Frau Kruse; she doesn't sleep, she sits there the whole night through.'

'No, no, she's something like that herself. All that with the black hen, that's something like it as well; she mustn't come. No, Johanna, just you stay here. And what a good thing you didn't fasten the shutters. Push them open and make a loud noise about it, so that I can hear a sound, a human sound … that's what I must call it, even if it does seem odd … and then open the window a little so that I can have some air and light.'

Johanna did what she had been told to do, and Effi sank back onto the pillows and soon into a profound sleep.

Chapter 10

It wasn't until six in the morning that Innstetten came back from Varzin and, warding off Rollo's attentions, withdrew as quietly as possible to his room. He made himself comfortable and allowed Friedrich to do no more than cover him with a travelling-rug. 'Wake me at nine.' And at that time he was woken. He got up quickly and said, 'Bring breakfast.'

'Madam's still asleep.'

'But it's late already. Has something happened?'

'I don't know; all I do know is that Johanna had to spend the night in Madam's room.'

'Well, send in Johanna.'

She came. She had the same rosy complexion as ever, so didn't seem to have been particularly affected by the events of the night.

'What's the matter with your mistress? Friedrich tells me something happened and you slept over there.'

'Yes, Herr Baron. The mistress rang three times, one after the other, so I thought right away it must mean something. And it did. She'll have been dreaming, or perhaps it was the other thing.'

'What other thing?'

'Oh, you know, sir.'

'I know nothing. At all events we have to put a stop to it. And what was my wife like when you went to her?'

'She seemed beside herself with fear and was clinging on to Rollo's collar; he was standing by Madam's bed and was frightened himself.'

'And what had she dreamt or, if you insist, what had she heard or seen? What did she say?'

'Something had crept across, close by her.'

'What? Who?'

'The one from upstairs. The one from the upper chamber or the little bedroom.'

'Nonsense, I say. The same silly stuff again and again. I don't want to hear any more about it. And then you stayed with my wife?'

'Yes, sir. I made myself a place to sleep close by her. And I had to hold her hand, then she fell asleep.'

'And she's still asleep?'

'Fast asleep.'

'That concerns me, Johanna. You can make yourself well again by sleeping, but also ill. We must wake her, taking care not to frighten her, of course. And Friedrich's not to bring the breakfast now, I'll wait until the mistress is here. And be careful how you go about it.'

*

Half-an-hour later Effi came. She looked charming, quite pale and leaning on Johanna. But when she saw Innstetten she rushed over, threw her arms round him and kissed him; the tears were pouring down her cheeks as she did so.

'Oh, Geert, thank God you're back. Now everything will be all right again. You mustn't go away again, you mustn't leave me alone again.'

'My dear Effi … put it there, Friedrich, I'll see to it myself … my dear Effi, I'm not leaving you alone out of lack of consideration or because the mood takes me, but because I have to; I have no choice, I have an official position, I can't say to Prince Bismarck, or to the Princess for that matter, "I can't come, your Highness, my wife feels so alone," or "my wife's afraid". If I were to say that, we'd look rather ridiculous, I certainly would and you as well. But first of all have a cup of coffee.'

Effi had a drink and it clearly revived her. She took her husband's hand again. 'You're quite right, I can see that's not possible. And we want to get on in the world. I say we, since I actually want it more than you …'

'That's the way you women are,' Innstetten said with a laugh.

'So that's agreed then: you can continue to accept your invitations and I'll stay and wait for "my lord", which reminds me of Hulda under the elder tree. I wonder how she's getting on?'

'Ladies such as Hulda always get on fine. But what else was it were you going to say?'

'I was going to say that I'll stay here, and alone if it has to be. But not in this house. Let's move. There are some very nice houses on the Embankment, one between Consul Martens's and Consul Grützmacher's and one on the market square, opposite Gieshübler's. Why can't we live there? Why does it have to be here? When we had friends or relations visiting I often used to hear them talk about families in Berlin moving out because of piano-playing or cockroaches or an unfriendly concierge; if people do it because of such trivial matters …'

'Trivial matters? A concierge? You can't say that …'

'If it's possible for things like that, it surely must be possible here, given that you're the Landrat and the people do as you say, some even owe you a debt of gratitude. I'm sure Gieshübler would help us, if only for my

sake, since he'll feel sorry for me. So tell me, Geert, shall we give up this house with a curse on it, this house with the …'

'Chinaman, you were going to say. There, you see, Effi, it's possible to say the dreaded word without him appearing. What you saw or what, as you said, crept past your bed, was the little Chinaman the maids stuck to the arm of a chair upstairs; I bet he was wearing a blue gown and a very flat hat with a shining button on top.'

She nodded.

'You see now, a dream, hallucination. And then I suppose Johanna will have told you some story yesterday evening, about the wedding, about the wedding up there …'

'No.'

'All the better.'

'She didn't tell me anything. But I can see from all this that there's something special here. And then the crocodile; everything's so eerie here.'

'But that first evening, when you saw the crocodile, you thought it was like a fairy-tale …'

'Yes, then …'

'And then, Effi, I can't really move out of here, even if it were possible to sell the house or do an exchange. It's the same as with declining an invitation to Varzin. I can't have people here in the town saying, Landrat Innstetten's selling his house because his wife saw the stuck-on picture of a Chinaman as a ghost by her bed. That would be the end of it for me, Effi. You can never get over looking so ridiculous.'

'Well, Geert, are you so sure that kind of thing doesn't exist?'

'I wouldn't say that. It's something one can believe in or, better, not believe in. But assuming such things do exist, what's the harm? The fact that there are bacilli, you'll have heard about them, flying round in the air is much worse and more dangerous than all these rollicking ghosts. Assuming that they do rollick, that they do really exist. And then I'm surprised to see this fear and aversion in you of all people, a Briest. It's as if you came from some ordinary middle-class home. A ghost is a distinction, like a pedigree and suchlike, and there are families I know who would no more like to lose their "white woman", that can also be a black one of course, than their coat of arms.'

Effi remained silent.

'Well, Effi, nothing to say to that?'

'What can I say? I've shown willing and let you have your way, but I still think that for your part you could show more sympathy. If you only knew how I long for that. I've suffered, really suffered, and when I saw you I thought I'd be released from my fear. But all you tell me is that you don't want to look ridiculous, not in the eyes of the Prince nor in those of the town. That's pretty cold comfort. I don't think that's much, and all the less when you end up contradicting yourself, and not only seem to believe in these things yourself but expect some noble pride in our ghost from me. And as regards families who value their ghost as highly as their coat of arms, that's all a matter of taste; my coat of arms is more important to me. We Briests don't have a ghost, thank God. We Briests have always been good people, and that's probably the reason.'

*

The argument would probably have gone on, perhaps even have led to a serious disagreement, if Friedrich hadn't come in to hand a letter to his mistress. 'From Herr Gieshübler. The messenger's waiting for your reply.'

The ill-humour immediately vanished from Effi's face; just to hear Gieshübler's name did her good, and the feeling increased as she scrutinized the letter. In the first place, it wasn't a letter but a note, with the address, 'Frau Baronin von Innstetten, née von Briest', wonderfully written in copperplate and, instead of a seal, a little round picture stuck on, a lyre with a rod through it, or it could have been an arrow. She handed the card to her husband, who also admired it.

'Well read it.'

Now Effi unstuck the wafer sealing it and read:

'Most esteemed Madam, most gracious Baroness,

I beg you to permit me to be so bold as to add a request to my most dutiful greetings this morning. A dear friend of many years, a daughter of our fair town of Kessin, Fräulein Marietta Trippelli, is due to arrive on the midday train and will stay here until tomorrow morning. On the 17th she has to be in Petersburg, where she is to give a concert in the middle of January. Prince Kotchukoff has most kindly agreed to offer her hospitality again this year. As ever, Fräulein Trippelli has been good enough to agree to spend the evening in my house and to perform a few songs, that I may choose at will, since nothing is too difficult for her. Would you, Frau Baronin, condescend to grace this musical soirée with your presence? At seven. I am sure your good husband, whose attendance I confidently expect, will support my submissive request. Present will be just Pastor Lindequist (as accompanist) and Frau Trippel, the widow of his predecessor.

Your devoted servant,
A. Gieshübler.'

'Well—' Innstetten said, 'yes or no?'

'Yes, of course. It will take me out of myself. And then I can't turn down my dear Gieshübler's very first

invitation.'

'Agreed. Right then, Friedrich, tell Mirambo—presumably it's he who brought the note—we'll be delighted.'

Friedrich left. Once he'd gone, Effi asked, 'Who is Mirambo?'

'The real Mirambo* is the chief of a band of brigands in Africa … Lake Tanganyika, if your geography goes that far … our Mirambo, however, is merely Gieshübler's chief dispenser of coal and general factotum; he'll probably be in attendance this evening, in white gloves and tails.'

It was clear that the little interlude had had a good effect on Effi and had helped to restore much of her natural lightheartedness, but Innstetten was determined to do his bit to speed her recovery. 'I'm glad you said yes, and that so quickly and without having to ponder, and now I'd like to make a further suggestion to revive your spirits completely. I can see that there's still something left over from the night that isn't part of my Effi; we really must get rid of it, and for that there's nothing better than fresh air. It's a splendid day, both fresh and mild with hardly a breath of wind; what would you say to going out for a drive, in my sleigh of course, and a long one, not just round the Plantation, with the bells and the white blanket of snow, and when we get back at four you can have a rest, and at seven we'll go to Gieshübler's and listen to Fräulein Trippelli.'

Effi took his hand. 'You are good to me, Geert, and considerate. I must have seemed childish to you, or at least very childlike; first of all with my fear and then demanding we sell the house and, what was worse, that about the Prince. To suggest you make yourself unavailable to him, it's ridiculous. After all, he's the man on whom our future depends. Mine as well. You wouldn't believe how ambitious I am. Actually, I only married you out of ambition. Now don't put on that serious look. I do love you … what do they say when they pluck petals off a flower? She loves me, she loves me not, she loves me, she loves me a lot.'

And she laughed out loud. 'And now tell me,' she went on, as Innstetten still said nothing, 'where shall we go?'

'I thought we'd go to the station, but by a roundabout route, and then back along the highway. And we'll have something to eat at the station or, better, at the Prince Bismarck tavern, if you remember we went past it on the day we arrived. Dropping in like that always makes a good impression, and I need to talk to the owner—Golchowski, *starosta* by the grace of Effi—about the elections; even if I don't think much of him personally, he keeps a decent inn and the food's even better than that. The people here know about food and drink.'

It was around eleven when they had this conversation. At twelve Kruse pulled up outside the door with the sleigh and Effi got in. Johanna wanted to get a foot-muff and furs, but after all she'd been through Effi felt such a need for fresh air that she said no to everything and just took a double rug. Innstetten said to Kruse, 'We're going to the railway station now, Kruse; we were both there this morning and people will be surprised, but no matter. I think we should drive along the Plantation and then head off to the left, towards the church tower in Kroschentin. Give the horses their heads. We must be at the station by one.'

So off they drove. Smoke was hanging over the white roofs of the town, for there was hardly any movement in the air. Utpatel's mill was only turning slowly, and they flew past, close to the churchyard; Berberis was growing over the railings and the tips of the bushes brushed against Effi, sending the snow down on her travel-rug. On the other side of the road was a fenced-in square, not much bigger than a flowerbed, and nothing could be seen in it apart from a young pine tree rising up from the middle.

'Is someone buried there as well?' Effi asked.

'Yes, the Chinaman.'

Effi started; it was like a stab of pain. But she had the strength to control herself and asked, with apparent calm: 'Ours?'

'Yes, ours. Of course he couldn't be put in the communal graveyard, so then Captain Thomsen, who was what you might call his friend, bought that plot and had him buried there. There's also a stone with an inscription. All before my time, of course, but people still talk about it.'

'So there is something after all. A story. You said something like that this morning. In the end it'll be best if I'm told what it is. As long as I don't know, despite all my good intentions, I'll be the victim of my own imaginings. Tell me what really happened. The reality of it can't torment me as much as my imagination.'

'Well done, Effi. I wasn't going to say anything about it, but now it's come out naturally and that's a good thing. It's nothing, really.'

'Doesn't matter; nothing or a lot or a little. Just begin.'

'Well, that's more easily said than done. The beginning's always the most difficult part of anything, stories included. I think, then, I'll start with Captain Thomsen.'

'Yes, do.'

'For many years Thomsen captained a so-called China trader, always sailing between Shanghai and Singapore with a cargo of rice, and would have been around sixty when he arrived here. I don't know whether he'd been born here or had other connections, but the long and short of it is that he came here and sold his ship, an old hulk that didn't bring in much, and bought a house, the one in which we now live. Out there he'd become a wealthy man. And that's the reason for the crocodile and the shark, and the ship, of course … So Thomsen settled here, he was always pleasant and neatly turned out (or so I've been told) and well-liked by all, including Kirstein, the burgomaster, and above all by the pastor at the time, a Berliner who had also come here, shortly before Thomsen, and aroused much animosity.'

‘I can believe it. I’ve noticed that too; they’re all so severe and self-righteous. I think that’s Pomerania.’

‘Yes and no, it all depends. There are areas where they’re not so strict at all, where everything’s higgledy-piggledy … But just look, Effi, there’s the tower of Kroschentin church right in front of us. Shall we abandon the idea of the station and go and visit old Frau von Grasenabb? Sidonie, if I’ve been rightly informed, is not at home, so we can risk it …’

‘Oh come now, Geert, what are you thinking of? It’s heavenly flying along like this, and I feel really free, all my fears are melting away. And now I’m to give all that up just to make a flying visit to some old folk, and very probably put them to some embarrassment as well. For God’s sake, no. And then above all, I want to hear the story. So we were with Captain Thomsen, whom I see in my mind as a Dane or an Englishman, very neat and tidy, with a white stand-up collar and very white linen …’

‘Quite right. That’s what he’s supposed to have been like. And with him was a young woman of around twenty; some say she was his niece, but most say his granddaughter which, given their ages, seems unlikely. And apart from his granddaughter, or niece, there was also a Chinaman, the one who’s buried in the dunes and whose grave we just drove past.’

‘Yes. And then?’

‘Well, this Chinaman was Thomsen’s servant, but Thomsen thought so highly of him that he was actually more of a friend than a servant. And so it went on for some years. Then all at once word went round that Thomsen’s granddaughter, she was called Nina, I think, was to get married, according to the old man’s wishes, to another sea-captain. And that was what happened. There was a big wedding in the house, the pastor from Berlin joined them in wedlock, and Utpatel, the miller who belonged to some nonconformist sect, and Gieshübler, whom people in the town thought unreliable in church matters, were both invited, and above all lots of captains with their wives and daughters. Things were pretty lively, as you can imagine. In the evening there was dancing, and the bride danced with everyone, eventually with the Chinaman as well. Then all at once word went round that she had gone, the bride that is. And she really had gone, somewhere or other, and no one knew what had happened. And fourteen days later the Chinaman died; Thomsen bought the patch of ground I showed you and he was buried there. The pastor from Berlin is supposed to have said he could just as well have been buried in the Christian churchyard, for the Chinaman had been a very good man and just as good as the others. Gieshübler told me no one quite knew whom he was referring to with “the others”.’

‘Well, there I disagree entirely with the pastor; one shouldn’t say things like that, because it’s challenging and inappropriate. Even Niemeyer wouldn’t have said that.’

‘And it was very much held against the poor pastor—he was called Trippel, by the way—so that it was actually fortunate that it led to his death, otherwise he would have lost his position. For the town was against him, even though they’d appointed him, just as you are, not to mention the Church Council of course.’

‘Trippel, you said? Then he must be connected with Frau Trippel, whom we’re to see this evening?’

‘Of course he’s connected with her. He was her husband, and the father of Marietta Trippelli.’

Effi laughed. ‘Of Marietta Trippelli! Ah, now I see it all clearly. In his note Gieshübler said she was born in Kessin, but I assumed she was the daughter of some Italian consul. There are so many foreign names here. But it turns out she’s German through and through, and the name comes from Trippel. Is she then so outstanding that she could risk Italianizing her name?’

‘Fortune favours the brave. But she is very good as well. She spent a few years in Paris with the famous opera-singer Pauline Viardot;* there she also met the Russian prince, for Russian princes are very enlightened, not tied by petty class prejudice, and Kotchukoff and Gieshübler—she calls him “Uncle” by the way, you could almost say he’s a born uncle—it’s really the two of them who made little Marie Trippel what she is today. It was through Gieshübler that she went to Paris, and then Kotchukoff turned her into Marietta Trippelli.’

‘Oh, Geert, how delightful all that is and what an ordinary life I led in Hohen-Cremmen. Never anything special.’

Innstetten took her hand and said, ‘You mustn’t say that, Effi. As far as ghosts are concerned, you can take whatever attitude you like. But beware of wanting something special, or what people call special. These things that seem so appealing to you—and I include in that the kind of life Marietta Trippelli leads—have to be paid for, usually with your happiness. I know very well how you love your Hohen-Cremmen, how attached to it you are, but you often make fun of it and have no idea what quiet days, such as you have in Hohen-Cremmen, can mean.’

‘Oh but I do,’ she said. ‘I know that very well. It’s just that I like hearing about something different from time to time, and then I get the feeling I’d like to be part of it. But you’re quite right. And what I actually long for is peace and quiet.’

Innstetten wagged his finger at her. ‘My dear, dear Effi, there you go imagining things again. Idle fancies all the time, sometimes going one way, sometimes the other.’

Chapter 11

The drive went as planned. At one the sleigh pulled up by the railway embankment outside the ‘Prince Bismarck’, and Golchowski, delighted to see the Landrat in his inn, took pains to prepare an excellent lunch. When the dessert and the Tokay had been served, Innstetten called over the landlord, who had appeared at the table from time to time to see that everything was in order, and asked him to join them at the table and tell them the news. Golchowski was the right man for that; not an egg could be laid for ten miles all round but he knew about it. And that was the case again that day. Sidonie Grasenabb, as Innstetten had rightly assumed, had gone to spend four weeks staying with the court chaplain’s family, as she had the previous Christmas; Frau von Palleske, he went on, had had to dismiss her maid on the spot because of a regrettable incident, and old Herr Fraude was in a bad way—they’d given out that he’d merely slipped, but it was a stroke and his son, who was in Lissa* with the Hussars, was expected back at any moment. After this chitchat they turned to more serious matters and got on to Varzin. ‘Yes,’ Golchowski said, ‘when you think of the Prince running a paper mill! It’s all very strange; he can’t actually stand paperwork, least of all printed paper, and now he’s setting up a paper mill of his own.’

‘True, my dear Golchowski,’ Innstetten said, ‘but you can’t avoid such contradictions in life, not even if you’re a prince or a great man.’

‘No, no,’ Golchowski said, ‘not even if you’re a great man.’

The conversation about the Prince would probably have continued, had not the signal bell sounded from the station announcing the imminent arrival of a train. Innstetten looked at the clock.

‘What train is that, Golchowski?’

‘That’s the Danzig express; it doesn’t stop here, but I always go up and count the carriages; now and then there’s someone I know at the window. There are some steps up the embankment here, right behind the courtyard, signal box 417 …’

‘Oh, let’s take advantage of that,’ Effi said. ‘I love watching trains …’

‘Then it’s high time we went, Madam.’

And so the three of them set off and stood, once they were up there, in a vegetable bed beside the box; it was covered in snow, of course, but there was a patch that had been cleared. The signalman was already there, flag in hand. And then the train was thundering across the station track and the next moment past the box and the vegetable patch. Effi was so excited she didn’t see anything and just watched, as if dazed, the last carriage disappear, a brakeman sitting on top.

‘It’ll be in Berlin at six-fifty,’ Innstetten said, ‘and an hour after that, if the wind holds, the people in Hohen-Cremmen will be able to hear it rattling past in the distance. Would you like to be on it, Effi?’

She said nothing. When he looked at her, he saw that there was a tear welling up in the corner of her eye.

*

As the train thundered past, Effi was seized with heartfelt yearning. However comfortable her situation, she still felt as if she were in an alien world. Whenever she found something that delighted her, she immediately afterwards became aware of what she was missing. Over there was Varzin, and there, in the other direction, the church tower of Kroschentin was shining, and far beyond it that of Morgnitz, and that was where the Grasenabbs and the Borckes lived, not the Bellings and not the Briests. ‘Yes, *them!*’ Innstetten had been quite right about her swift change of mood, and now she saw everything that lay behind her as if transfigured. But however strong the yearning with which she watched the train disappear, she was of far too flexible a disposition to dwell on it for long, and on the drive home, as the red ball of the setting sun poured out its shimmering light over the snow, she felt free again; everything looked fresh and beautiful, and when, after their return to Kessin, she entered the hall of Gieshübler’s house on the stroke of seven, she was not merely contented but almost in high spirits, to which the scent of valerian and orris-root permeating it probably contributed.

Innstetten and his wife arrived on time, but despite that were still later than the other guests; Pastor Lindequist, old Frau Trippel, and Marietta herself were already there. Gieshübler—in a blue tail-coat with dull gold buttons, and his pince-nez on a broad, black ribbon that looked like the ribbon of some medal across his white piqué waistcoat—could only control his excitement with difficulty. ‘May I introduce you, ladies and gentlemen: Baron and Baroness Innstetten, Frau Pastor Trippel, Fräulein Trippelli.’ Pastor Lindequist, whom they all knew, stood on one side, smiling.

Until the introductions Marietta Trippelli, early thirties, very mannish, with a pronounced humorous air, had been sitting in the place of honour on the sofa. After the introductions, however, she went over to a high-backed chair, saying, ‘I beg you, Madam, henceforth to assume the burdens and hazards of your office, for I think the word hazards’—she indicated the sofa—‘is not out of place here. I pointed this out to Gieshübler years ago but in vain; he is, I’m afraid, as stubborn as he is kind.’

‘But Marietta …’

‘The sofa you see here, that first saw the light of day at least fifty years ago, has been constructed according to some old-fashioned countersunk principle, and anyone who ventures to sit on it without first reinforcing the seat with a veritable mountain of cushions will sink into a bottomless pit, or at least so far down that their knees will tower up like a monument.’ All of this Marietta Trippelli said in a tone that was both good-humoured and self-assured, as if to say, ‘You’re Baroness Innstetten and I’m Marietta Trippelli.’

Gieshübler was full of enthusiasm for his beloved singer and thought very highly of her talent, but all his enthusiasm did not blind him to the fact that she lacked some of the social graces. And those were precisely what he himself cultivated. ‘My dear Marietta,’ he said, ‘you have a delightfully amusing way of treating such questions; but as far as my sofa’s concerned, you are truly mistaken and I’d be happy to have any expert decide between us. Even a man such as Prince Kotchukoff …’

‘Oh, please, Gieshübler, leave *him* out of this. Always Kotchukoff. The way you go on, the Frau Baronin here will be thinking that this prince—who, anyway, is only one of the smaller ones and doesn’t have more than a thousand souls, that is *had* (in the past, when their wealth was counted in souls*)—that I was proud that this prince had made me his thousand-and-first. No, the situation is quite different; you know me, Gieshübler, always free-spoken. Kotchukoff is a good companion and he’s my friend, but he knows nothing at all about art and that kind of thing, certainly not about music, even though he composes masses and oratorios—most Russian princes, if they’re active artistically, tend to the religious or orthodox side somewhat—and questions of furnishings and decoration belong to the many things he knows nothing about. He’s just about sufficiently aristocratic to be easily persuaded to buy anything that’s brightly coloured and costs a lot of money.’

Innstetten was amused, and Pastor Lindequist was very clearly enjoying this as well. For poor old Frau Trippel, however, her daughter’s free-and-easy tone was a source of constant embarrassment, and Gieshübler thought it was time to cut short a conversation that was becoming awkward. The best way of doing that was with a few vocal pieces. It was unlikely Marietta would choose songs of questionable content, and even if she were to, her art was so great that the content would be ennobled. So he said, ‘My dear Marietta, I’ve ordered our little collation for eight. So we have three-quarters of an hour, unless you would perhaps prefer to regale us with a cheerful song at table, or perhaps after we’ve finished …’

‘Oh, come now, Gieshübler. You, the aesthete! There’s nothing less aesthetic than a song performed on a full stomach. Moreover—and I know you’re a man of choice cuisine, yes, a gourmet—moreover, it tastes better when you’ve the business of the evening behind you. First art, then hazelnut ice-cream, that’s the right order.’

‘So I may bring you the music now, Marietta?’

‘Bring the music. What do you mean by that, Gieshübler? If I know you, you’ll have whole cabinets full of music, and I can’t sing you the whole of Bock & Bote.* Music! What *kind* of music, Gieshübler, that’s the important thing. And then it has to be in my range. Alto.’

‘Don’t worry, I’ll bring something suitable.’

And he started rooting through a cabinet, pulling out one drawer after another while Marietta pushed her chair round the table to the left so that she was right next to Effi. ‘I’m curious to see what he brings,’ she said. Effi didn’t quite know what to say.

‘I’d assume,’ she started hesitantly, ‘something by Gluck,* something particularly dramatic … In fact, Fräulein Trippelli, if you don’t mind my saying so, I’m surprised to hear that you only do recitals. I would have thought that you, more than most, were made for the stage. Your figure, your power, your voice … So far I’ve seen so little of that kind of thing, only during short visits to Berlin … and I wasn’t much more than a child. But I would have thought *Orpheus* or *Chrimhild* or the *Vestal*.’*

Marietta Trippelli shook her head from side to side and stared into space, but didn’t get round to replying because Gieshübler returned and handed her half-a-dozen scores she quickly glanced at. ‘ “Erlkönig”* … ugh; and *Die schöne Müllerin** … Oh, come now, Gieshübler, you’re a dormouse, you must have been asleep for seven years. And then Loewe’s ballads, not exactly the latest thing either: “Die Glocken von Speier”.* Oh, that eternal ding-dong, it’s laying it on with a trowel, tasteless and hackneyed. But here: “Ritter Olaf”* … yes, that’s all right.’

So she stood up and, the pastor accompanying, sang ‘Olaf’ with great assurance and bravura, to general applause.

After that more songs in a similar Romantic vein were found, some excerpts from *The Flying Dutchman* and *Zampa*, and ‘Heideknabe’,* all pieces that she sang with equal calmness and virtuosity, while Effi was stunned by both the words and the music.

When Marietta Trippelli had finished ‘Heideknabe’ she said, ‘That’s enough,’ a declaration she made so firmly that neither Gieshübler nor any of the others had the courage to press her for more. Least of all Effi. When Gieshübler’s friend was sitting beside her again she simply said, ‘If only I could tell you, my dear Fräulein, how grateful I am for that. Everything was so beautiful, so assured, so accomplished. But, if you’ll forgive me, there’s one thing I admire even more and that’s the calm way you perform these pieces. I’m so easily carried away by impressions, and when I hear the merest ghost story I start trembling and can hardly get myself back under control. And your singing is so powerful and profoundly moving, yet you yourself are quite serene and unperturbed.’

‘Yes, my dear Frau Baronin, that’s the way it is in art. And above all in the theatre, from which I have fortunately been preserved. For, however much I feel personally immune to its temptations—it ruins one’s reputation, the best thing one has, that is. What is more, one’s art becomes deadened, as colleagues have assured me a hundred times. People are being poisoned and stabbed, and the dead Juliet whispers a pun to Romeo, or perhaps a malicious remark, or he presses a billet-doux into her hand.’

‘I just can’t understand that. But to stick with what I have to thank you for this evening, for example the ghostly atmosphere in “Olaf”, I can assure you that if I have a frightening dream, or if I think I can hear quiet dancing and music above when there’s no one there, or someone creeping past my bed, I’m beside myself with fear and can’t forget it for days on end.’

‘Well, yes, my dear Madam, what you are talking about there is different, it’s something that’s real or at least could be real. A ghost walking in a ballad, that doesn’t give me the shivers at all, but like other people I find a ghost walking across my room very unpleasant. In that our feelings are the same.’

‘Have you ever experienced something like that?’

‘Certainly. And that when I was staying with Kotchukoff. And I’ve insisted I shall sleep somewhere else this time, perhaps with the English governess. She’s a Quaker, I’ll be safe with her.’

‘So you think that kind of thing is possible?’

‘My dear Madam, when you’re my age and have been around a lot, in Russia, and even spent six months in Romania, you think anything’s possible. There are so many bad people, and that other stuff as well, it’s part of it, in a manner of speaking.’

Effi pricked up her ears.

‘I come’, Marietta Trippelli went on, ‘from a very enlightened family (only Mother had some problems with that), and yet my father said to me, when there was all that talk about the psychograph,* “There’s something in it, Marie.” And he was right, there is something in it. We’re surrounded, we’re being watched from all sides. That’s something you’ll find out for yourself.’

At that moment Gieshübler came up to them and gave Effi his arm, Innstetten took Marietta, then came Pastor Lindequist and Frau Trippel. And so they sat down to dine.

Chapter 12

It was late when they set off home. Already at ten o'clock Effi had said to Gieshübler that it must be time, Fräulein Trippelli had a train she mustn't miss and would have to leave Kessin at six. However, Marietta, who was standing beside them and heard this, had protested against this show of consideration in her characteristically forthright manner. 'Oh, Madam, you think people such as me need regular sleep, but that's not the case; what we need regularly is applause and high fees. You may well laugh. Moreover, I can sleep in the carriage (that's the kind of thing you learn), in any situation, and even on the left side, and I don't even need to unbutton my dress. Of course I'm never tightly laced up; my chest and lungs must always be free, and above all my heart. Yes, that's the main thing, my dear Madam. And, anyway, as far as sleep is concerned, it's not the quantity that counts but the quality; a good five-minute snooze is better than five hours tossing and turning, now this way, now that. In fact you sleep wonderfully well in Russia, despite the strong tea. It must be the air, or dining late or because you're so pampered. You have no worries in Russia, in that respect Russia's even better than America, though as far as the money's concerned they're the same.'

After Marietta Trippelli had explained all this, Effi had made no more suggestions about it being time to go, and so midnight came. Their farewells were happy and heartfelt, and not without a certain familiarity.

It was quite a long way from the Moor Pharmacy to the Landrat's house, but it was made shorter by the fact that Lindequist asked to be allowed to accompany Innstetten and his wife for part of it; a walk under the stars, he said, was the best way of getting over the effect of Gieshübler's Rhine wine. Naturally they passed the time talking about various items of Trippelliana; Effi started with what she could remember and the pastor immediately took it up. Much given to irony, he had asked her about many very worldly matters, but then finally enquired about her position regarding the church, to which she had replied that, as far as she was concerned, there was only *one* position, the strictly orthodox one. Her father, she went on, had been a rationalist, almost a freethinker, which was why he would most of all have liked to have the Chinaman buried in the churchyard. For her part she took the opposite view, despite the fact that personally she had the great advantage of not believing in anything. But in her absolute non-belief she was every moment aware that that was a luxury one could only allow oneself as a private person. That was something the state could not countenance, and if she were in charge of the Ministry of Public Worship and Instruction or the Church Council she would deal with such matters extremely rigorously. 'I can feel something of a Torquemada* inside me.'

Innstetten was in a very mellow mood and told them that he, for his part, had deliberately avoided such a tricky subject as matters of dogma and emphasized the moral aspect more. His main point had been the seductive nature of public appearances, that such a person must be constantly in danger, to which Marietta Trippelli had replied lightly, with the emphasis on the second half of the sentence, 'Yes, constantly in danger; mostly one's voice.'

Chatting thus, they relived their Trippelli evening before they separated, and only three days later Gieshübler's friend once more brought it back to mind with a telegram to Effi from St Petersburg. It read, 'Madame la Baronne d'Innstetten, née de Briest. Bien arrivée. Prince K. à la gare. Plus épris de moi que jamais. Mille fois merci de votre bon accueil. Compliments empressés à Monsieur le Baron.* Marietta Trippelli.'

Innstetten was delighted, but why he expressed his delight in such lively terms was beyond Effi.

'I can't understand you, Geert.'

'Because you don't understand Marietta Trippelli. I'm delighted at the way she's the real thing; it's all there, right down to the last jot and tittle.'

'So you see all this as play-acting?'

'What else? Everything calculated for over there and for here, for Kotchukoff and Gieshübler. Gieshübler will probably make her a gift, perhaps just a bequest.'

Gieshübler's musical soirée had been in the middle of December; immediately afterwards the preparations for Christmas began, and Effi, who would otherwise have found those days difficult to get through, was glad she had a household that made demands on her. She had to ponder, ask, purchase, and all that stifled any gloomy thoughts. On the day before Christmas Eve presents arrived from her parents in Hohen-Cremmen, with all sorts of little gifts from the Jahnkes included in the box: lovely pippins from a tree Effi and Jahnke had grafted several years previously, and brown wrist- and knee-warmers from Bertha and Hertha. Hulda just wrote a few lines because, as she said in excuse, she had to knit a travel-rug for X. 'Which simply won't be true,' Effi said. 'I bet X doesn't exist. She just can't stop surrounding herself with admirers who aren't there.'

And thus Christmas Eve arrived.

Innstetten decorated the tree for his young wife himself, there were candles burning on it and a little angel hovering on the top. There was also a crib with pretty little streamers and inscriptions, one of which gave a subtle hint of an event to take place in the Innstetten household during the following year. Effi read it and blushed. Then she went over to Innstetten to thank him, but before she could a Yuletide gift, as was the

tradition in Pomerania, was thrown into the hall: a crate with a whole host of things in it. Finally they found the most important item, an elegant little box of comfits with all kinds of little Japanese pictures stuck on it; among the contents was a note. It read:

> Three kings came to Christ in days of yore,
> And one of those eastern kings was a Moor.
> On this day a Moor pharmacist
> Begs to offer this spicy gift:
> Not frankincense and, no, not myrrh
> But comfits filled with sweet *liqueur*.

Effi read it two or three times and was delighted with it. 'There's something particularly comforting about a good person paying his respects. Don't you agree, Geert?'

'I certainly do. It's actually the only thing that gives us pleasure, or at least ought to give us pleasure. For every one of us is involved in all kinds of stupid stuff. Me too. But then that's the way we are.'

On Christmas Day there was a church service, on the next day they were out at the Borckes'; everyone was there apart from the Grasenabbs, who didn't want to come because Sidonie wasn't there, which everyone thought a rather strange excuse. Some even whispered, 'It's the other way round, that's precisely why they ought to have come.' On New Year's Eve there was the Club ball, at which Effi's attendance was obligatory and also what she wanted, for the ball would give her the opportunity finally to see the whole upper crust of the town gathered together. Johanna was fully occupied preparing her mistress's finery; Gieshübler, who had a hothouse as he had everything else, sent some camellias; and Innstetten, despite the shortage of time, drove out on the afternoon of the ball to Papenhagen, where three barns had burnt down.

It was very quiet in the house. Christel, with nothing to occupy her and sleepy, had pulled a footstool over to the stove, and Effi withdrew to her bedroom, where she sat at a little desk between the mirror and the sofa to write to her Mama. She'd only sent a card to thank her for her Christmas letter and Christmas presents, otherwise she hadn't sent any news for weeks.

'Kessin, 31st December.

DEAR MAMA,

It looks as if this is going to be a long letter as I haven't written for ages—the card doesn't count. The last time I wrote I was busy with the preparations for Christmas and now that's over. Innstetten and my good friend Gieshübler did everything they could to make Christmas Eve as nice as possible for me, but I still felt a little lonely and longed for you and Papa. In fact, however much cause I have to be grateful and content and happy, I can't entirely get rid of the feeling of loneliness and if I used to mock, perhaps more than necessary, the tears of emotion that were constantly welling up in Hulda's eyes, I'm being punished for it now and have to fight back such tears myself. For Innstetten mustn't see them. I'm sure, however, that all that will get better when things liven up in our house and that will be the case, my dear Mama. What I hinted at recently is now certain and Innstetten lets me know every day how pleased he is about it. I don't need to say how happy I am about this myself, not least because then I'll have more life around me and diversion or, as Geert puts it, a "darling toy". He's probably right with that expression but I'd rather he didn't use it, since it always gives me a little twinge, reminding me how young I still am and not much more than a child myself. I can't get over this idea (Geert says it's unhealthy) and it makes what ought to be my greatest happiness into a constant source of embarrassment. Yes, my dear Mama, when the good Flemming ladies recently asked me about all sorts of things, I felt as if I was poorly prepared for an examination and I think I must have given some really stupid answers. I was in a bad mood as well, because some things that sound like expressions of sympathy are merely curiosity and seem all the more importunate because I still have a long wait, until the summer, for the happy event. The beginning of July, I think. You must come here then or, even better, once I've more or less recovered I'll arrange to go to Hohen-Cremmen. Oh, I really do look forward to it, and to the Havelland air—here it's almost always raw and cold—and every day we'll have a drive out into the Marshes and all the trees will be red and yellow and I can already see the child stretching out its hands for them, for I'm sure it will feel that's where it really belongs. But I'm just writing that for *you*. Innstetten mustn't know and I also feel as if I ought to apologize to you for announcing as early as this my intention to go to Hohen-Cremmen with the child, instead of sending you the warmest of invitations to come to Kessin, that has fifteen hundred summer visitors every year and ships with the flags of all sorts of nations and even a hotel on the dunes. But the reason for my lack of hospitality is not that I wouldn't welcome visitors, I am a Briest after all, it's simply our house here that, although there's so much about it that's attractive and special, is not really a proper house, just a home for two people and not really even that, we haven't got a dining-room, which is an embarrassment when a few visitors turn up. True, there are rooms on the first floor, a large one and four smaller ones, but none of them is very inviting. I'd call them lumber-rooms, if there was any lumber in them, but they're quite empty apart from a few wicker chairs, and make a very strange impression, to say the least. Now I'm sure you'll be saying that's easily changed, but the house we live in is … is haunted. There, it's out. By the way, I must beg you not to mention that in your reply; I always show your letters to Innstetten and he'd be furious if he knew I'd told you that. I wouldn't have done it, either, especially since I haven't been troubled by it for weeks and have stopped feeling frightened, but Johanna told me it keeps reappearing, in particular when there's someone new in the house. And I couldn't expose you to such a danger or, if that's going too far, to such a peculiar and unpleasant disturbance. I won't bother you with the story behind it today, at least not at any great length. It concerns an old captain of a so-called China trader and his granddaughter who, after a short engagement to a young captain from here, disappeared on her wedding-day. But let that pass. What's more important is a young Chinaman her father had brought back from China, at first as a servant but then he became the old man's friend and he died shortly afterwards and is buried in a lonely place beside the churchyard. I drove past it recently but quickly turned aside and looked the other way because I thought that

otherwise I'd see him sitting on his grave. For oh, dear Mama, I really did see him once, or at least that's what I thought, when I was sound asleep and Innstetten was away visiting the Prince. It was terrible, I wouldn't want to go through anything like that again. And I really can't invite you to a house like that, however attractive it is (in a strange way it's both cosy and eerie at the same time). And I would go as far as to say that in this matter Innstetten, although I agreed with him in many aspects, didn't behave quite correctly. He wanted me to look on it as women's nonsense and laugh at it, but then all at once he seemed to believe in it himself and rather oddly expected me to regard a family ghost like that as something superior and aristocratic. But I neither can nor want to do that. Indulgent as he is towards me in general, in this matter he's not indulgent or considerate enough. For I know from Johanna that there's something to it and also from our Frau Kruse. She's the coachman's wife and she spends all the time sitting in an overheated room with a black hen. That in itself is frightening enough. And now you know why I want to come and stay with you when the time comes. Oh, if only it were already here. There are so many reasons why I wish it were. This evening it's the New Year's Eve Ball and Gieshübler—the only nice person here, despite the fact that he has a high shoulder, or actually something more—Gieshübler's sent me some camellias. I might perhaps dance after all. Our doctor says it won't do any harm, on the contrary. And Innstetten agreed as well, which surprised me. And now give my best wishes and kisses to Papa and all the other dear ones. And a Happy New Year.

Your Effi.'

Chapter 13

The New Year's Eve Ball had lasted until late in the morning, and Effi had been extensively admired, though not quite as uncritically as her bouquet of camellias, that everyone knew came from Gieshübler's hothouse. In general, though, things remained as they were after the ball, hardly any attempts were made to establish social contact, with the result that the winter felt as if it went on for a long, long time. Visits from the neighbouring gentry were rare and the duty return visit was always preceded by a weary, 'Yes, Geert, if we really have to, but I'm dying of boredom.' A comment that Innstetten always just accepted. The things that were said about the family and children, farming as well, were tolerable; but when matters of religion cropped up and the pastors who were present were treated as little popes, or regarded themselves as such, then it was with melancholy that her thoughts went back to Niemeyer, who had always been reserved and modest, despite the fact that at every important church occasion people would say he had what it took to be called to the 'cathedral'. Although, with the exception of Sidonie Grasenabb, people were friendly, she never felt comfortable with the Borckes, Flemmings, and Grasenabbs, and she would have been in a pretty bad way as far as pleasure, amusement, even just feeling reasonably content were concerned had it not been for Gieshübler. He was a kind of human Providence in the way he looked after Effi, and she was grateful to him for it. Amongst all his other qualities, he was naturally a keen and attentive newspaper reader, not to mention the fact that he ran the local reading group, so that hardly a day passed without Mirambo bringing a large white envelope with all kinds of magazines and newspapers in which the important passages were marked, mostly with a fine pencil line, sometimes in heavy blue crayon, with an exclamation- or question-mark beside them. And that wasn't all, he also sent figs and dates, bars of chocolate in glossy paper tied with a red ribbon, and if something particularly beautiful came into bloom in his hothouse, he would bring it himself and would then spend a happy hour chatting to the young woman he liked so much and for whom he felt a mixture of all the finer feelings of love at once: those of a father and uncle, a teacher and admirer. Effi was touched by all this and often wrote about it in her letters to Hohen-Cremmen, so that her mother started to tease her with her 'love of the alchemist'; but this well-meant teasing missed its mark, indeed it touched an almost painful spot because it made her aware, if only vaguely, of what was actually lacking in her marriage: avowals, suggestions, little attentions. Innstetten was kind and good, but he wasn't a lover. He had the feeling that he loved Effi and the clear conscience that fact gave him meant that he didn't feel the need to make any special effort. It had almost become the rule that when Friedrich brought the lamp he would leave his wife's room and go to his own. 'I've got an awkward matter to sort out.' And with that he would go. He did leave the curtain between the rooms drawn back so that Effi could hear him leafing through a file or the scratch of his pen as he wrote, but that was all. Sometimes Rollo would come and lie down in front of her on the fireside rug, as if to say, 'Just have to check up on you again, no one else's going to do it.' Then she would bend down and say quietly, 'Yes, Rollo, we're alone.' At nine Innstetten would reappear, mostly with the newspaper, to take tea, and would talk about Bismarck, who had annoying problems again, especially with that Eugen Richter* whose attitude and language were unacceptable, and then go through the appointments and honours, most of which he criticized. Finally he would talk about the elections and how fortunate it was to be in charge of a district where people still had respect. Once he'd been through all that, he would ask Effi to play something, from *Lohengrin* or *Die Walküre*, for he was a Wagner enthusiast. It was unclear what had brought Innstetten to him; some said his nerves, for however down-to-earth he seemed to be, he was actually highly strung; others put it down to Wagner's attitude to the Jewish question.* Both were probably right. By ten Innstetten was relaxed and would indulge in a few well-meaning but somewhat weary caresses, that Effi tolerated without really responding to them.

*

Thus the winter passed, April arrived, and green shoots appeared in the garden behind the yard, which pleased Effi; she couldn't wait for summer, with its walks along the beach and the holidaymakers. When she looked back, the Trippelli evening at Gieshübler's and the New Year's Eve ball, yes, that had been all right, they had even been enjoyable, but the months that had followed had left much to be desired, and above all they had been so monotonous that she had even written to her mother:

'Can you imagine, Mama, that I'm almost reconciled to our ghost? Of course I wouldn't want to go through that terrible night again, when Geert was over at the Prince's, no, I certainly wouldn't; but always being alone with nothing happening, that has its difficult side too and then when I wake up in the night I sometimes listen to see if I can't hear the shoes sliding across the floor up there, and when everything stays quiet, I'm almost disappointed and think, if only it would come back, only not too bad and not too close.'

It was in February that Effi had written that, and now it was almost May. Over in the Plantation things were livening up already, you could hear the finches singing. That week was also the one when the storks returned,

and one floated over her house and settled on a barn beside Utpatel's mill. It was its old resting-place. Effi, who was now writing frequently to Hohen-Cremmen, reported that as well and it was in the same letter that she went on:

'There's one thing I almost forgot, Mama dear: the new commander of the district army reserve, whom we've had here for almost four weeks now. Well, yes, do we really have him here? That is the question and an important question as well, however much you laugh, you can't help laughing at that because you don't know how desperate the social situation still is here. At least for me who doesn't get on with the local gentry. Perhaps it's my fault, but that doesn't alter the fact that the situation is desperate and for that reason I was putting all my hopes of relief on the new district commander. His predecessor was a horror, with poor manners and even worse habits and, to crown it all, always short of cash. He made us suffer all the time, Innstetten even more than me, and when, at the beginning of April, we heard that Major von Crampas—that's the name of the new one—was here, we fell into each other's arms as if all our troubles here in Kessin were over. However, as I suggested, it seems that although he is here, nothing's going to come of it again. Crampas is married, two children of ten and eight, his wife one year older than him, let's say forty-five. Now in principle that wouldn't be a problem, why shouldn't I be able to have wonderful chats with a motherly friend? Marietta Trippelli was close to thirty and we got on very well together. But there's no joy to be had with Frau von Crampas (she wasn't born a "von", by the way). She's always depressed, almost melancholy (like our Frau Kruse, whom in fact she reminds me of) and all that out of jealousy. He, Crampas, is said to be a man who's had many affairs, a ladies' man, something that's always seemed ridiculous to me and would be ridiculous in this case too if he hadn't had a duel with a comrade because of these matters. His arm had been smashed just below the left shoulder and you can see it straight away even though the operation, as Innstetten told me (I think they call it resection; it was Wilms* who carried it out), is said to be a masterpiece of the surgeon's art. Both Herr and Frau von Crampas came to make their call on us a fortnight ago; it was a very awkward situation since Frau von Crampas kept her eye on her husband in such a way that he was moderately and I very embarrassed. Three days later, when he was alone with Innstetten and I could follow the course of their conversation from my room, I discovered that he can be very different, relaxed and high-spirited. I talked to him myself afterwards. A perfect gentleman, exceptionally urbane. Innstetten was in the same brigade as him during the war and they quite often saw each other at Count Gröben's* in the north of Paris. Yes, Mama dear, that would have been something to start new life in Kessin; he, the Major, doesn't suffer from the Pomeranian prejudices, even though they say he comes from Swedish Pomerania.* But his wife! It's impossible without her and absolutely impossible with her.'

*

Effi was quite right, no real closer friendship developed between them and the Crampases. They occasionally saw each other out at the Borckes', another time briefly at the station, and a few days later during an excursion by boat to a large oak and beech wood called the 'Schnatermann', by the Breitling estuary, but contact never went beyond cursory greetings, and Effi was glad when June arrived and the season approached. There was still a lack of summer visitors, of course, only odd ones would appear before Midsummer Day, but the preparations themselves provided a diversion. Roundabouts and stalls with shooting-targets were being set up in the Plantation, the boatmen were caulking and painting their boats, every little house had new curtains, and the rooms that were damp and therefore had rot under the floorboards were fumigated and then aired.

There was a certain excitement in Effi's house as well, though for a different expected arrival than that of the summer visitors, of course; even Frau Kruse wanted to join in as far as possible. But Effi was horrified at the idea, and said, 'Geert, see that Frau Kruse doesn't touch anything; it won't do any good and I'm frightened enough as it is.' Innstetten promised her everything, Christel and Johanna, he said, had plenty of time, and to put such thoughts out of his young wife's mind he dropped the subject of the preparations entirely, and asked her instead if she'd noticed that a summer visitor had already moved in across the road, not the very first, but one of the first.

'A gentleman?'

'No, a lady. She's been here before, always taking the same apartment. And she always comes this early in the season because she can't bear it when everything's full.'

'I can't blame her for that. Who is she?'

'Frau Rohde, the widow of a filing-clerk.'

'Strange. I've always imagined clerks' widows as poor.'

'Yes,' Innstetten laughed, 'as a rule they are. But in this case you have an exception. She must have more than just her widow's pension. She always brings a lot of luggage, much, much more than she uses, in fact she's quite a singular woman, eccentric, infirm, and not very steady on her feet. She doesn't trust herself to go out alone and always has an oldish servant with her who's strong enough to protect her or to carry her if something happens. She's got a new one this year, but this one's very stocky as well, like Marietta Trippelli only even more robust.'

'Oh, I've already seen her. Nice brown eyes with a loyal, trusting look. But just a little stupid as well.'

'Yes, that's her.'

*

That conversation between Effi and Innstetten took place in the middle of June. From then on new visitors were

coming every day, and a walk out to the quay to watch the steamer arriving was a kind of daily occupation for the Kessiners. Of course Effi was unable to join them, since Innstetten couldn't accompany her, but at least she could enjoy seeing the usually empty street fill with crowds heading out to the beach and the beach hotel, and to do that she spent much more time than usual in her bedroom, the window of which gave her the best view. Johanna would then stand beside her and could tell her almost everything she wanted to know. Most of the passers-by were people who came every year, and so the maid could not just tell her their names but often had a little story to go with them.

That was an entertainment for Effi and cheered her up. But on Midsummer Day of all days it so happened that, shortly before eleven when the stream of traffic from the steamer was usually at its most lively, instead of cabs loaded with parents, children, and trunks a carriage draped in black (followed by two cabs with mourning housings) came down the street leading from the centre of town to the Plantation and stopped outside the house opposite. Frau Rohde had died three days before, and her Berlin relations, who had arrived at short notice, had decided not to have the body taken to Berlin but buried in the Kessin churchyard on the dunes. Effi stood at the window watching the strangely solemn scene being played out across the road with keen interest. The people who had come from Berlin were two nephews and their wives, all around forty and with enviably healthy complexions. The nephews, in neatly fitting dress-coats, were acceptable, and the matter-of-fact, businesslike way they went about everything was seemly rather than out of place. But their two wives! They were visibly determined to show the Kessiners what real mourning was and so wore long, black-crape veils that went down to the ground and also covered their faces. And now the coffin, on which there were a few wreaths and even one palm-leaf, was placed on the hearse and the two couples took their seats in the carriages. Lindequist got into the first with one of the couples, but behind the second was the landlady and, walking beside her, the imposing figure of the attendant Frau Rohde had brought with her to Kessin. The latter was very agitated, and her agitation seemed to be genuine, even if it wasn't exactly mourning; on the other hand, one could tell all too clearly that the landlady, a widow who was sobbing loudly, was on the look-out for a gratuity, even though she had the advantage, for which all the other landladies envied her, of being able to re-let the apartment that had been taken for the whole summer.

Once the procession had set off Effi went to her garden behind the courtyard in order to clear from her mind, between the boxwood hedges, the impression, so devoid of love and life, that the scene across the road had left her with. When this was unsuccessful, she decided she felt like going for a longer walk rather than continuing to plod round the garden, especially since the doctor had told her that plenty of exercise in the open air was the best way to prepare for what lay ahead. Johanna, who was with her in the garden, brought her a shawl, hat, and parasol, that could also serve as an umbrella, and with a friendly 'Goodbye', Effi went out and set off for the little wood that, alongside the broad, macadamized road, had a narrower footpath leading to the dunes and the hotel by the beach. There were benches along it and she used every one, for she found it tiring to walk now, in the midday heat. But once she was sitting down and watching the carriages with people in their finery driving past she brightened up again, for seeing cheerful scenes was the stuff of life for her. The worst part of the walk came when the wood ended: sand and more sand and not a scrap of shade, but fortunately the path had been surfaced with boards and planks, so she arrived at the beach hotel in good spirits, if somewhat hot and tired. People were already eating in the dining-room inside, but outside everything around was quiet and empty, which at that moment was what she liked best. She got the waiter to bring her a sherry and a glass of Biliner mineral water,* and watched the sea shimmering in the bright sunlight as little waves broke on the shore. 'Bornholm's* over there and beyond it Visby,* that Jahnke was always going into raptures about years ago. Visby was almost more important to him than Lübeck and Wullenweber.* And beyond Visby there's Stockholm, where they had the Stockholm Bloodbath,* and after that the great rivers, then the North Pole and the midnight sun.' And she was gripped by a longing to see all of that. But then, almost with a start, she remembered the event that was so close at hand. 'It's a sin for me to be faraway, dreaming such frivolous thoughts, when my mind ought to be on the immediate future. Perhaps I'll be punished for it and we'll both die, the child and me. And the hearse and the two carriages won't be stopping across the road, they'll stop outside our house … No, no, I don't want to die here, I don't want to be buried here, I want to go back to Hohen-Cremmen. And Lindequist, good that he is—I still prefer Niemeyer, he christened and confirmed and married me, and Niemeyer's to bury me as well.' And at that a tear fell on her hand. Then she laughed again. 'But I'm still alive, I'm only seventeen and Niemeyer's fifty-seven.'

She could hear the clatter of crockery from the dining-room, but all at once she thought she heard the sound of chairs being pushed back. Perhaps people were already getting up, and she wanted to avoid meeting anyone, so she quickly stood up herself to go back into the town by a roundabout route. This passed close by the graveyard on the dunes, and since the gate was open she went in. Everything was in bloom, butterflies were flying over the graves, and there were a few gulls hanging high up in the air. It was so quiet and beautiful there she would have liked to linger by the first graves, but as the sun burning down was getting hotter by the minute, she went up to where the path was shaded by weeping willows and ash planted by the graves. When she came to the end of the shade she saw on the right a fresh mound of sand with four or five wreaths on it and, close by, a bench. It was beyond the row of trees, and sitting there was the good, robust woman who had been the last mourner following Frau Rohde's coffin beside the landlady. Effi immediately recognized her and was moved to

see this good, faithful woman, for that is what she felt sure she was, there in the scorching heat of the sun. It must have been two hours since the burial.

'It's a hot spot you've chosen here,' Effi said, 'much too hot. And if you're unlucky you'll get sunstroke.'

'And that would be best.'

'Why so?'

'Then I'd be finished with all this.'

'I don't think one should say that kind of thing, even if you're unhappy or someone you like has died. I presume you liked her very much?'

'Me? *Her?* God forbid.'

'But you're very sad. There must be some reason for that.'

'There certainly is, Ma'am.'

'You know who I am?'

'Yes. You're the Landrat's wife from across the road. I was always talking about you with the old woman. At the end she couldn't, because she couldn't get her breath properly, she had it on her chest, it must have been water. But for as long as she could still speak she talked all the time. She was a real Berliner …'

'A good mistress?'

'No, I'd be lying if I said that. She's under the ground now and you shouldn't speak ill of the dead, especially when they're only just at rest. Yes, she'll certainly be that at last. But she was a bad lot, nagging and mean, and she made no provision for me. And her relations who came from Berlin yesterday … they were bickering until late into the night … no, they're a bad lot too, a really bad lot. Greedy and grasping and hard-hearted: they did pay me my wages, but in a surly, unfriendly manner and with all sorts of nasty comments, just because they had to and because it was only six days to the end of the quarter. Otherwise I wouldn't have got anything, or just half or just a quarter. Nothing but what they were obliged to give me. And they gave me a torn five-mark note so that I can get back to Berlin; well, that should be just about enough for fourth class and I suppose I'll have to sit on my suitcase. But I'm not going to; I'm going to stay sitting here until I die … God, I thought I'd be settled for a bit and I could have put up with the old woman. And now nothing's come of it and I'm going to be pushed around again. And I'm Catholic into the bargain. Oh, I'm fed up, most of all I'd like to swap places with the old woman, as far as I'm concerned she could go on living … She'd have liked that; those kind of people who enjoy tormenting others, even when they can't get their breath, are always the ones who like living most.'

Rollo, who had come with Effi, was now sitting in front of the woman with his tongue hanging right out, and looking at her. When she stopped talking he stood up, took a step forward, and laid his head on her knee.

Suddenly the woman was transformed. 'God, that's something! A creature that can stand me, gives me a friendly look, and puts its head on my knee. God, it's a long time since I've had something like that. Well then, old boy, what are you called? Aren't you a beauty.'

'Rollo,' Effi said.

'Rollo, that's a funny name, but it doesn't matter. I've got a funny name as well. Christian name, that is, and that's the only name people like us have.'

'So what is your name?'

'I'm called Roswitha.'

'Yes, that's unusual, that must be …'

'Yes, Ma'am, it's a Catholic name. And on top of that I am a Catholic. From Eichsfeld.* And being Catholic always makes things more difficult, makes life a misery. A lot of people refuse to hire Catholics because they're off to church so often. "Always going to confession and still they keep quiet about the most important thing"—God, how often have I heard that, first of all when I was in service in Giebichenstein* and then in Berlin. But I'm a poor Catholic, I've quite got out of the habit, perhaps that's why I'm in such a bad way; no, you shouldn't abandon your faith, you should do everything you're supposed to.'

'Roswitha.' Effi repeated the name and sat down beside her on the bench. 'What do you plan to do now?'

'Plan to do, Ma'am? I plan to do nothing at all. Really and truly I'd like to stay sitting here till I drop down dead. Then people would think I loved the old woman like a faithful dog, and couldn't leave her grave and so died there. But that's wrong, you don't die for an old woman like that; I just want to die because there's no way I can live.'

'Let me ask you something, Roswitha. Are you fond of children? Have you ever worked where they had young children?'

'I certainly have. Those are the best, the nicest positions I've had. An old Berliner like her—God forgive me, she's dead now, she'll be before the throne of God and can accuse me—with old women like that, well, it's terrible all the things you have to do, it really makes you feel sick, but a sweet little thing, a little mite like a doll, looking at you out of those big, round eyes, that really is something, it really does your heart good. When I was in Halle I was nurse to the wife of the manager of the salt-works, and in Giebichenstein, where I was later, I brought up twins on the bottle. Yes, Ma'am, I know about that, it's all second nature to me.'

'Now I'll tell you something, Roswitha, you're a good, faithful woman, I can see that just by looking at you, a bit outspoken but that's no harm, some of the best are like that, and I immediately felt I could trust you. Will you come and work for me? I'm expecting a child soon, God grant me his aid, and once the baby's here it will

have to be looked after and attended to and perhaps even bottle-fed, you never know, though I hope that won't happen. What do you think, will you come and help me? I can't imagine I'm wrong about you.'

Roswitha leapt up, grasped the young woman's hand, and kissed it impulsively. 'So there is a God after all. The night is darkest just before dawn. You'll see, Ma'am, it will be all right; I'm a respectable woman and I have good testimonials. You'll see that when I bring you my record of employment. The very first time I saw Madam I thought, if only you could work for someone like that. And now I can. O dear Lord, O holy Virgin Mary, who would have thought this would happen after we'd buried the old woman, and her relations saw to it that they got away and left me stuck here.'

'Yes, Roswitha, good things can come like a bolt from the blue as well. Now it's time to go. Rollo's getting impatient, he keeps running over to the gate.'

Roswitha was ready, but first she went over to the grave again, mumbled something and crossed herself, then they went back down the shady path to the graveyard gate. Across the road was the patch surrounded by railings, its white stone gleaming and glinting in the sun. Now Effi could look at it more calmly. For a while the path continued between the dunes until, shortly before Utpatel's mill, they reached the edge of the little wood. There they turned left and, taking an avenue called the Reeperbahn* that ran diagonally through the wood, Effi headed for her house together with Roswitha.

Chapter 14

In less than quarter of an hour they were at the house. When they went into the cool hall Roswitha's attention was caught by all the strange things hanging there, but before she could start thinking about them Effi said, 'Go in there, Roswitha. That's the room where we sleep. First of all I'm going to go and see my husband in the Landrat's office over there—the big house next to the little one where you were—to tell him I'd like to take you on to look after the child. I'm sure he'll be happy with that, but I have to get his agreement first. And once that's done we'll have to move his things out and you can sleep in the alcove in my room. I'm sure we'll get along with each other.'

When Innstetten heard what it was about he took it in good part, and quickly said, 'You were quite right to do that, Effi, and if there's nothing too bad in her record of employment we'll take her on the basis of her honest face. It's very rare that one is wrong about that.'

Effi was pleased to encounter so little in the way of problems, and said, 'Now things will be all right. I'm not afraid any more.'

'Of what, Effi?'

'Oh, you know … But things you imagine are the worst, sometimes worse than anything else.'

*

With her few belongings Roswitha moved across into the house straight away and settled into the little alcove. At the end of the day she went to bed early and, weary as she was, fell asleep immediately.

The next morning Effi, who for a while had been suffering from her fears again (it was the time of the full moon), asked Roswitha how she had slept and whether she had heard anything.

'What?' Roswitha asked.

'Oh, nothing. I was just asking; something going across the floorboards, like a brush sweeping or a person sliding.'

Roswitha laughed, which made a particularly good impression on her new mistress. Effi's upbringing had been firmly Protestant, and she would have been horrified if anyone had seen anything Catholic about her; despite that, she believed that Catholicism was better at protecting us against such things as 'those up there'; indeed, that idea had had considerable influence on her plan to make Roswitha part of the household.

They quickly settled in together, for Effi, like most young ladies from the country areas of Brandenburg, enjoyed hearing little anecdotes, and the late Frau Rohde and her miserliness, as well as her nephews and their wives, provided an inexhaustible source of those.

Johanna liked to listen in as well. She would smile when Effi, as she often did, laughed out loud at Roswitha's graphic descriptions, quietly surprised that her mistress enjoyed all that silly stuff so much. Her surprise, however, which went together with a sense of superiority, was a good thing in that it ensured there were no quarrels about precedence. Roswitha was simply seen as a clown, and to envy her would for Johanna have been no different from being jealous of Rollo's position as a special friend.

Thus a week passed in pleasant chat, and Effi felt almost at ease as she was less apprehensive than she had been about what was to come. Nor did she feel it was that close, but two days later there was an end to the cosy chats; people were running and dashing to and fro, even Innstetten abandoned his habitual reserve, and on the morning of the 3rd of July there was a cradle beside Effi's bed.

Dr Hannemann patted her hand and said, 'Today's the anniversary of the Battle of Königgrätz,[*] pity it's a girl. But you can always have one of the other kind next and the Prussians have lots of victories to celebrate.' Roswitha could well have had similar ideas, but in the meantime her delight at the child that was there was completely unreserved, and without further ado she called her 'Wee Annie', which her young mother took as a sign, saying Roswitha must have chanced on that name by inspiration. Even Innstetten could think of no objections, and so they were talking of little Annie long before she was baptized. Effi, who intended to be at her parents' in Hohen-Cremmen from the middle of August on, would have liked to have put off the baptism until then, but that was impossible. Innstetten couldn't take leave, so it was arranged that the baptism would take place, in the church of course, on the 15th of August, even though that was the anniversary of Napoleon's birthday[*] (which did indeed raise objections from some families). Since their house had no room large enough, the subsequent meal was held in the large hotel on the Embankment; all the neighbouring gentry had been invited and came. Pastor Lindequist proposed a charming toast, that everyone admired, to mother and child, which led Sidonie von Grasenabb to remark to her neighbour, a young civil servant from a noble family with strict views on religion, 'Yes, he's all right as far as that kind of speech goes, but his sermons are fit for neither God nor man; he's half-hearted about religion, one of those who will be rejected because they are lukewarm. I think this is not the right place to quote the actual words from the Bible.'[*] Immediately afterwards Herr von Borcke stood up to propose a toast to Innstetten. 'Ladies and gentlemen, these are difficult times in which we

live, rebellion, defiance, insubordination wherever you look. But as long as we still have men and, might I add, women and mothers …' (and with that he made a bow with an elegant gesture in Effi's direction), 'as long as we still have men like Baron Innstetten, whom I am proud to call my friend, things will be all right, old Prussia will still survive. Yes, my friends, Pomerania and Brandenburg, that's what will do it, that's what will crush the head of the pernicious dragon of revolution. If we remain loyal and steadfast, we will win through. Our brother Catholics, whom we must respect, even though we are fighting against them, have their rock of St Peter, but we have our *rocher de bronze*.* Ladies and gentlemen, raise your glasses to Baron Innstetten.'

Innstetten gave a very brief reply of thanks. Turning to Major von Crampas, who was sitting next to her, Effi said that all that about the rock of St Peter was probably a compliment to Roswitha; later on she'd go over to Justizrat Gadebusch and ask if he agreed with her. For some reason or other Crampas took this remark seriously and advised her not to ask the Justizrat,* which amused Effi no end.

'I thought you were a better judge of character.'

'But, my dear Frau Baronin, no judgement gets one anywhere with beautiful young women who aren't even eighteen.'

'You really are ruining your chances, Major. Call me a grandmother, if you like, but allusions to the fact that I'm not yet eighteen are unforgivable.'

After the meal was finished the late-afternoon steamer came down the Kessine and moored at the pier opposite the hotel. All the windows were open, and Effi, who was taking coffee with Crampas and Gieshübler, watched the scene on the other side of the river. 'Tomorrow at nine the same ship's going to take me up the river, by midday I'll be in Berlin, in the evening in Hohen-Cremmen, and Roswitha will be alongside me, carrying the child. I hope she won't cry. Oh, I'm already looking forward to it so much. My dear Gieshübler, have you ever felt so happy at seeing your parental home again?'

'Yes, I've felt that too, Frau Baronin. Only I didn't have a little Annie to take home with me.'

'It's never too late,' Crampas said. 'Your good health, Gieshübler, you're the only sensible person here.'

'But there's only brandy left, Major.'

'All the better.'

Chapter 15

Effi left in the middle of August; by the end of September she was back in Kessin. Several times during those six weeks she had felt a desire to be back, but when she was home again and entered the dark hallway, that was only lit by the rather pale light from the stairs, she all at once felt afraid again and said quietly, ‘There’s no such pale light anywhere in Hohen-Cremmen.’

Yes, a few times during the weeks in Hohen-Cremmen she had longed to be back in the ‘eerie house’, but all in all her days at home and been happy and contented. True, she found things difficult with Hulda, who couldn’t get over the fact that she was still waiting for a husband or fiancé, but they were all the better with the twins, and more than once, when she was playing ball or croquet with them, she completely forgot she was married. Those had been happy moments. But what she enjoyed most of all was standing the way she used to on the swing as it flew through the air, feeling a strange tingling, a pleasurable shudder of danger, as she thought, ‘Now I’m going to fall.’ When she finally jumped down she would go with the two girls to the bench outside the schoolhouse and, once they were sitting there, tell Jahnke, who soon came to join them, about her life in Kessin, that was half Hanseatic, half Scandinavian, but at any rate very different from that in Schwantikow and Hohen-Cremmen.

Such were her daily amusements, with the occasional trip out into the summer Marshes, mostly in the phaeton; but what Effi enjoyed most of all were the chats she had almost every morning with her Mama. They would sit upstairs in the large, airy drawing-room, with Roswitha rocking the child and singing all sorts of cradle-songs in Thuringian dialect that no one could understand, perhaps not even Roswitha herself. Effi and Frau von Briest would go and sit by the open window, looking down on the park while they spoke, at the sundial or the dragonflies hovering almost motionless over the pond, or at the flagstones where Herr von Briest would be sitting by the outside staircase, reading the newspaper. Every time he turned a page he would first take off his pince-nez and wave to his wife and daughter. Once he was on the last page, that was usually the *Anzeiger fürs Havelland*, the one with local news, Effi would go down, either to sit with him or to take a stroll together round the garden and park. On one such occasion they turned off from the gravel path to a little monument Briest’s grandfather had erected in memory of the Battle of Waterloo, a rusty pyramid with a cast-iron figure of Blücher* at the front and a similar one of Wellington at the back. ‘Have you walks like this in Kessin,’ Briest said, ‘and does Innstetten accompany you and tell you all kinds of things?’

‘No, Papa, I don’t have that kind of walk. It’s impossible, we’ve only got a little garden behind the house, it’s hardly even a garden, just a few beds bordered with box and some vegetable plots with two or three fruit-trees in them. Innstetten’s not interested in that and probably doesn’t think he’s going to stay in Kessin for long.’

‘But you must get some exercise and fresh air, child, you’re used to that.’

‘But I do. Our house is next to a little wood they call the Plantation. I go for walks there a lot and take Rollo with me.’

‘Always Rollo,’ Briest laughed. ‘If one didn’t know otherwise, one could almost think Rollo meant more to you than your husband and child.’

‘Oh, that would be terrible, Papa, though actually—this much I have to admit—there was a time when life there wouldn’t have been possible without Rollo. That was at the time when … you know … He as good as saved me, or at least I imagined he did, and since then he’s been my friend, one I know I can always rely on. But he’s only a dog, people come first, of course.’

‘Yes, people always say that, but I have my doubts. It’s a funny thing about dumb animals, what’s right or wrong, the jury’s still out on that one. Believe me, Effi, that’s another big question. Just imagine someone has an accident in the water or, what’s worse, on thin ice, and there’s a dog there, one like your Rollo, let’s say, well it won’t give up until it’s got the poor person back on land. And if they’re dead it’ll lie down beside the body and bark or whine until someone comes, and if no one comes it’ll stay there until it’s dead itself. That’s what a dumb animal like that will always do. Mankind, on the other hand! God forgive me, but sometimes I think dumb animals are better than humans.’

‘But, Papa, what if I were to tell Innstetten that …’

‘No, you’d better not do that, Effi.’

‘Of course Rollo would save me, but Innstetten would save me too. He has his honour.’

‘He certainly does.’

‘And he loves me.’

‘Of course, it goes without saying. And where there’s love, it’s returned. That’s the way things are. The only thing that surprises me is that he hasn’t taken a couple of days off and nipped over. When you’ve got such a young wife …’

Effi blushed because the same thought had occurred to her, but she didn’t want to admit it. ‘Innstetten’s so conscientious and, I think, wants to be well regarded and has his plans for the future; Kessin’s just a stepping-

stone. And I'm not going to run off. He's sure of me. If you're too affectionate … and with the difference in age … people would just grin.'

'Yes, they do do that, Effi. But you have to accept it. And don't say anything about this. Not even to your Mama. It's so difficult to decide what you should or should not do. That's another big question.'

*

There had been more than one conversation like that during Effi's stay with her parents, but fortunately the effect never lasted long. Similarly, the somewhat melancholy feeling that had immediately overcome Effi on her return to the house in Kessin quickly dissipated. Innstetten was full of attentions, and once they had taken their tea over animated gossip about what had been going on in the town and who was in love with whom, Effi affectionately took his arm to continue their chat in her room and to hear a few more anecdotes about Fräulein Trippelli, who had recently been in lively correspondence with Gieshübler which, as always, meant there was a new charge to her account that was permanently in the red. During this conversation Effi was in very high spirits, felt she truly was a young woman, and was glad to be rid of Roswitha's presence for the immediate future, the maid having been moved to the servant's quarters.

In the morning she said, 'It's fine today and mild, and I hope the veranda looking out onto the Plantation's still sound and we can go and sit outside and have breakfast there. We'll be back in our rooms soon enough, and the winter in Kessin really is four weeks too long.'

Innstetten was happy with that. The veranda Effi was talking about, perhaps 'tent' would be a better word, had been repaired during the summer, three or four weeks before Effi had gone to Hohen-Cremmen, and consisted of a large wooden deck with a huge canvas canopy above it and, on either side, broad linen curtains on iron rings that could be pushed back and forward along iron rods. It was a delightful spot, admired throughout the summer by the holidaymakers who had to pass it on their way to the beach.

Effi, leaning back in a rocking-chair, pushed the coffee tray over from the side of the table to her husband and said, 'You could be mother today, Geert; I feel so comfortable in this rocking-chair, I don't feel like getting up. So make an effort, and if you're really glad to have me back I'll soon find ways of making it up to you.' As she spoke she straightened the damask tablecloth and left her hand there, that Innstetten picked up and kissed.

'How did you ever manage to cope without me?'

'Not very well, Effi.'

'You're just saying that and looking downcast, while it's not true at all.'

'But Effi …'

'As I will prove to you. If you'd felt the slightest longing to see your child—I'm not going to talk about myself, after all, what is one to such a noble lord who was a bachelor for so long and wasn't in a hurry to …'

'Well?'

'Yes, Geert, if you'd felt just the slightest longing, you wouldn't have left me all on my own in Hohen-Cremmen, like a widow, with no company apart from Niemeyer and Jahnke and the Bellings in Schwantikow. And none of the Rathenow hussars came over, it was as if they were afraid of me or that I was too old now.'

'The way you talk, Effi. You're a little coquette, did you know that?'

'Thank God you said that. For you men, that's the best we can be. And you're no different from all the rest, despite your solemn, staid airs. I'm well aware of that, Geert … Actually you're …'

'I'm what?'

'Well, I'd rather not say. But I know you very well; actually, as my uncle from Schwantikow once said, you're an affectionate type, born under Venus, and Uncle Belling was quite right when he said that. You just don't want to show it, you think it's not proper and might ruin your career. Am I right?'

Innstetten laughed. 'You're not entirely wrong. Do you know what, Effi, you seem to be quite different. Until little Annie arrived you were a child. But all at once …'

'Well?'

'Suddenly you're a different person. But it suits you, I like you very much like that. Do you know what?'

'What?'

'There's something seductive about you.'

'Oh Geert, my one and only, that's marvellous what you've just said; it really does my heart good to hear it … Pour me another half-cup … Do you know, that's something I've always wished for? We have to be seductive, otherwise we're nothing at all …'

'Is that your own idea?'

'It could be my own, but I got it from Niemeyer.'

'From Niemeyer! God in heaven, what a pastor! No, there aren't any like that round here. But how did he come to say that? It's more like a Don Juan or ladies' man talking.'

'Yes, who knows,' Effi laughed … 'But isn't that Crampas? Coming from the beach? He surely can't have been for a dip? On the 27th of September …'

'He does that kind of thing quite often. Just showing off.'

By this time Crampas was close by and wished them a good morning.

‘Good morning,’ Innstetten called back. ‘Come over, come over.’

Crampas, who was in civilian clothes, did so, and kissed Effi’s hand. Effi continued to rock in her chair. ‘You must excuse me, Major, for not playing the lady of the house, but ten in the morning’s not the time for it, nor is the veranda a house. Things are quite informal here or, if you like, intimate. Now sit down and tell me what you’ve been doing and why. From your hair—and for your sake, I wish you had more of it—it’s clear you’ve been for a dip in the sea.’

He nodded.

‘Irresponsible,’ Innstetten said, half seriously, half joking. ‘Only four weeks ago you saw yourself the business with Heinersdorf,* the banker, who thought the sea and the magnificent breakers would show him respect because of his millions. But the gods are jealous of each other, and Neptune immediately rose up against Pluto,* or at least against Heinersdorf.’

Crampas laughed. ‘Yes, a million marks! If I had that, my dear Innstetten, I wouldn’t have risked it at all; the weather may be fine, but the water was only nine degrees. But people like yours truly, with his million overdraft—forgive me for boasting—can risk it without fear of arousing the jealousy of the gods. And I take comfort in the proverb: a man destined for the gallows will never drown.’

‘But, Major, surely you wouldn’t … how shall I put it? … bring something as banal as that on yourself by idle talk. Though there are people who think that everyone more or less deserves what you were talking about. Still, Major … for a major …’

‘… it’s not a traditional way of meeting one’s end, agreed, Frau Baronin. Not traditional and in my case not even probable, so it was all just a quotation or, to be more precise, a *façon de parler*. But when I said just now that the sea wouldn’t harm me, there was something that was honestly meant behind it. The fact is that I will die a true and, I hope, honourable soldier’s death. It was only a gypsy prophecy, but it struck a chord in my own conscience.’

Innstetten laughed. ‘There’ll be some difficulty with that, Crampas, unless you intend to serve under the Grand Turk or the Chinese dragon.* They’re still fighting out there but, believe you me, history’s over and done with here for the next thirty years, so anyone who wants to die a soldier’s death …’

‘… has to order a war from Bismarck. I know all that, Innstetten. But that would be no problem for you. It’s the end of September now; in ten weeks at the latest the Prince will be back in Varzin, and since he’s taken a liking to you—not to put it any stronger, I don’t want to end up facing the barrel of your pistol—I’m sure you can get just a little war for an old comrade from Vionville.* After all, the Prince is only human, and a persuasive tongue can help.’

During this conversation Effi had been rolling bits of bread into balls, tossing them on to the table, and arranging them in patterns in order to indicate that she would like a change of topic. Despite that, Innstetten seemed about to reply to Crampas’s jocular remarks, so she decided to intervene directly. ‘I don’t see why we should concern ourselves with your manner of death, Major; life is closer and, at the moment, a much more serious business.’

Crampas nodded.

‘It’s right for you to admit I’m right. How should one live here? *That* is the question, *that* is more important than all the rest. Gieshübler wrote to me about it. I’d show you the letter, except that would be indiscreet and vain of me, for there’s all sorts of other incidental remarks in it … Innstetten doesn’t need to read it, he has no appreciation of that kind of thing … beautifully neat copperplate, and turns of phrase as if our friend had grown up at an old French court rather than on the old market square in Kessin. And that he’s deformed and wears white cravats such as no one else does any more—where he gets them ironed I’ve no idea—all that fits together perfectly. Well, Gieshübler wrote to me about the Club evenings and mentioned an organizer by the name of Crampas. So you see, Major, I’d be happier to hear about that rather than a soldier’s death or the other kind.’

‘Me too, I assure you. And the winter season is bound to be a splendid one if we can be assured of the support of the Frau Baronin. Marietta Trippelli’s coming …’

‘Fräulein Trippelli? That makes me superfluous.’

‘Not at all, my dear Frau Baronin. Marietta Trippelli can’t sing from one Sunday to the next, that would be too much for her and too much for us; variety is the spice of life, a truth that seems to be contradicted by every happy marriage.’

‘If there are happy marriages, mine excepted …’ and she took Innstetten’s hand.

‘Variety, then,’ Crampas went on. ‘And to provide that for the Club, whose vice-president I have the honour to be at the moment, we need to get all our experienced members together. If we can do that I’m sure we can turn the town upside-down. The plays have already been chosen: *War in Peace*, *Monsieur Hercules*, Wilbrandt’s *Young Love*, perhaps also Gensichen’s *Euphrosyne*.* You as Euphrosyne, I as the old Goethe. You’ll be amazed how well I can play the old Goethe.’

‘I’m sure I will. I learnt from the letter of my alchemical secret correspondent that you are also an occasional poet. At first I was surprised …’

‘For I didn’t look the part.’

‘No. But since I know that you bathe at nine degrees, I’ve changed my mind … the Baltic at nine degrees, that surpasses the Castalian spring …’*

‘The temperature of which is unknown.’

‘Not to me; at least no one will contradict me. But I have to get up now, here comes Roswitha with Wee Annie.’

She stood up quickly and went over to Roswitha, took the child from her, and held it up, with a proud and happy look.

Chapter 16

The weather was fine, and remained so well into October. One result of this was that the tent-like veranda came into its own, so much so that they regularly spent the mornings there. Towards eleven the Major would usually turn up, first to ask how the Frau Baronin was and to indulge in a little scandal-mongering with her, which he was exceptionally good at, then to arrange a ride with Innstetten, often heading inland, up the Kessine as far as the Breitling estuary or, even more often, out to the breakwaters. Once the men had gone Effi would play with the child or leaf through the newspapers and magazines Gieshübler continued to send her; now and then she wrote a letter to her Mama or would say, 'Roswitha, let's take Annie for a walk,' and Roswitha would take the bassinet and push it, with Effi walking behind, the few hundred yards into the little wood, to a place with chestnuts scattered over the ground that they would pick up and give to the child to play with. Effi didn't go into the town much, there was no one there she could have a real chat with after her second attempt to establish closer relations with Frau von Crampas had failed. The Major's wife was, and remained, unsociable.

This went on for several weeks, until Effi suddenly expressed the wish to go out riding with them; she was passionately fond of it, she said, and it was asking too much to expect her to abstain from something that meant so much to her simply because of what the townsfolk would say. The Major thought it was a capital idea, and Innstetten, who was clearly unhappy with it—so unhappy that he kept saying it would be impossible to find a horse suitable for a woman—had to give way when Crampas assured him that he would see to that. And, indeed, the required mount was found and Effi was in seventh heaven at being able to tear along the beach now that the divisive injunctions, 'Ladies' Bathing' and 'Gentlemen's Bathing', no longer applied. Rollo usually joined them, and since it had occasionally happened that they wanted to rest on the beach or go for a short walk, they decided they would have servants to accompany them, to which end the Major's batman, an old Treptow uhlan called Knut, and Kruse, Innstetten's coachman, were transformed into grooms, though only to a certain degree: they were garbed in a rather motley livery which, much to Effi's disappointment, still bore visible traces of their actual functions.

It was already the middle of October when this whole cavalcade set off for the first time, Innstetten and Crampas in front with Effi between them, then Kruse and Knut and, bringing up the rear, Rollo, who however, fed up with trotting along behind, was soon in front of everyone. After they'd passed the now empty beach hotel and, keeping to the right on the beach path with a moderate sea washing over it, soon afterwards reached the breakwater, they decided they'd like to dismount and walk to the end of it. Effi was the first out of the saddle. Between the two stone walls the broad Kessine flowed calmly out to the sea that lay before them, a sunlit expanse ruffled just here and there by a slight wave.

Effi had never been out there yet, for when she arrived in Kessin the previous November the weather was already stormy, and when summer came she was no longer in a state to undertake long walks. Now she was delighted, thought everything was grand and splendid, indulged in derisive comparisons of the Havelland Marshes with the sea, and whenever she came across a piece of driftwood she picked it up and threw it, either to the left into the sea or to the right into the Kessine. As always, Rollo was happy to oblige his mistress by plunging in; all at once, however, his attention was caught by something in a different direction and, creeping forward carefully, indeed almost fearfully, he suddenly leapt at some object they could see in front. But his leap was in vain, for at the same moment a seal slipped smoothly and silently off a seaweed-covered rock down to the sea that was only five yards away. Its head could be seen for a short while, then that also disappeared under the surface.

They were all excited, and Crampas had visions of a seal-hunt and said they should bring their guns the next time, 'those blighters have a solid pelt'.

'Impossible,' Innstetten said. 'Harbour police.'

'The things you say,' the Major laughed. 'The harbour police! Surely the three authorities we have here can all turn a blind eye. Does everything have to be so terribly lawful? All lawful activities are boring.'

Effi clapped.

'Yes, Crampas, that suits you and, as you can see, Effi is applauding. Of course. Women always shout for the police straight away, but the law can go hang as far as they're concerned.'

'A woman's right since time immemorial and we can do nothing to change it, Innstetten.'

'No,' Innstetten laughed, 'and I don't want to, either. There's no point in attempting the impossible. But a man like you, Crampas, who has grown up under the flag of discipline and knows very well that without it, without order, life would be impossible, a man like you shouldn't talk like that, not even in jest. You have a worldly, couldn't-care-less attitude and assume the world won't come crashing down round your ears. It won't, not immediately. But one day it will.'

For a moment Crampas was embarrassed, because he thought that had been said with a particular intention in mind, though that wasn't the case. Innstetten was just giving one of his little lectures, as he was wont to do.

‘Take Gieshübler, for example,’ he went on to bridge the awkwardness, ‘ever the gallant, but he still has his principles.’

The Major had recovered his composure and said in his old tone, ‘Oh yes, Gieshübler; the best fellow in the world and, if possible, with even better principles. But then where does he get them from? And why? Because he has an “affliction”. Anyone who’s well-formed is for frivolity. Without frivolity life’s not worth the powder and shot.’

‘Now listen, Crampas, that’s precisely what one sometimes gets.’ As he spoke he fixed his gaze on the Major’s slightly shortened left arm.

Effi heard little of this conversation. She had gone close to the spot where the seal had been, and Rollo was beside her. Then both of them looked up from the stone at the sea, waiting to see whether the ‘mermaid’ would reappear.

*

At the end of October the election campaign began, making it impossible for Innstetten to continue to take part in their excursions; Effi and Crampas would presumably have also been forced to give them up, because of the reaction of the townsfolk, had Knut and Kruse not formed a kind of guard of honour. Thus it was that their rides continued into November.

The weather had changed, a constant wind from the north-west brought banks of cloud and white-topped waves crashed against the shore, but it wasn’t cold yet and remained dry, so that these rides beneath a grey sky to the thunder of the breakers were almost better than they had been in the sunshine beside a calm sea. Rollo would tear along in front of them, occasionally spattered by the foam, and the veil of Effi’s riding-hat streamed out behind her. Talking was almost impossible, but when they turned off into the protection of the dunes or, even better, into the pine-wood that was farther back, everything became still, Effi’s veil no longer blew in the wind, and the narrowness of the track forced the two riders close together. That was the time when, of necessity going at a walk because of the gnarled tree-roots, they could resume the conversations interrupted by the noise of the waves. Crampas had a fund of small-talk and recounted stories of his time in the war or with the regiment, also little anecdotes revealing traits of Innstetten’s character who, with his earnestness and reserve, had never really fitted in with his high-spirited comrades, so that he was actually more respected than liked.

‘I can imagine that,’ Effi said. ‘Fortunately respect’s the most important thing.’

‘Yes, at the right time. But it’s not always appropriate. And along with all that there was his mystical side that sometimes caused offence, on the one hand because soldiers don’t have much time for that kind of thing, and on the other because we had the—perhaps mistaken—idea that he didn’t really believe in what he was trying to convince us of.’

‘Mystical side?’ Effi said. ‘What do you mean by that, Major? Surely he can’t have held conventicles and played at being a prophet. Not even the one from that opera … I’ve forgotten the name.’

‘No, he didn’t go that far. But perhaps we ought to stop there. I don’t want to say something behind his back that could be misinterpreted. Especially since they’re things that could well be discussed in his presence, things that, whether we mean to or not, would only be blown up into something special if he’s not there to intervene all the time, to refute us or even laugh us to scorn.’

‘But that’s cruel, Major. How can you arouse my curiosity like that and then keep me in an agony of suspense? First there’s something, then it’s nothing. And mysticism! Does he see ghosts?’

‘See ghosts! I’m not saying that, but he did like to tell us ghost stories. And once he’d got us really worked up and some probably even frightened, it suddenly seemed as if he simply wanted to make fun of his credulous comrades. To put it in a nutshell, it once happened that I told him straight out, “Oh, come on, Innstetten, you’re just putting on an act. You can’t fool me. You’re just having us on. In fact you don’t believe in this any more than we do, you’re just trying to cut a figure; you have this idea that a reputation for being unusual goes down well with our superiors. They don’t want ordinary men in higher posts, and since that’s your ambition, you’ve looked for something distinctive and that’s how you came up with ghosts.” ’

Effi didn’t say a word, which the Major eventually found oppressive. ‘You’re saying nothing, Frau Baronin?’

‘No.’

‘May I ask why? Have I offended you? Or do you think it ungentlemanly of me to make what I have to admit, despite my protestations, are slightly mocking remarks about an absent friend? But despite all that, you’re doing me an injustice. All of this will be continued in his presence, when I will repeat to him every word I’ve just said.’

‘I can believe that.’ Now Effi broke her silence and told him all that she had experienced in their house and Innstetten’s strange reaction. ‘He didn’t say yes and he didn’t say no, and I didn’t know what to make of him.’

‘Still the same old Innstetten, then,’ Crampas laughed. ‘That’s what he was like in the old days when we were quartered with him in Liancourt and then later on in Beauvais.[*] He was in an old bishop’s palace there—incidentally, this might interest you: it was a bishop of Beauvais, who rejoiced in the name of “Cochon”, who condemned the Maid of Orleans to death—and not a day, that is not a night, passed without Innstetten having incredible experiences. Though there was always a “perhaps” about them; it could have been nothing. And he still works on the same principle, as I see.’

‘Yes, right. But now I have a serious question, Crampas, and I expect a serious answer: how do you explain all that?’

‘Well, my dear Frau Baronin …’

‘Don’t try to wriggle out of it, Major. This is all very important for me and I’m your friend. I want to know what this means. What does he think he’s doing?’

‘Well, Frau Baronin, God can see into our hearts, but a major in command of the district army reserve sees nothing at all. How can I solve a psychological puzzle like that? I’m a simple man.’

‘Oh, don’t be silly, Crampas. I’m too young to have a great knowledge of human nature, but I’d have to be a little girl not yet confirmed, almost not yet baptized, to think you a simple man. You’re the opposite, you’re dangerous …’

‘The most flattering thing you can say to a man well into his forties with a “retired” after his title. So, what does Innstetten think he’s doing …’

Effi nodded.

‘Well, if I have to say something I’d say that a man like Landrat Baron Innstetten, who could become head of a government department or something like that any day (believe me, he’s heading for the top), that a man like Baron Innstetten thinks he can’t live in an ordinary house, not in a cottage like the Landrat’s residence—forgive me, Frau Baronin, but that’s what it is. So he does his bit. A haunted house isn’t an ordinary house … That’s one thing.’

‘One thing? My God, have you something to add?’

‘Yes.’

‘Go on then, I’m all ears. But, if at all possible, make it something good.’

‘I’m not too sure about that. It’s a delicate matter, almost unseemly, especially for your ears, Frau Baronin.’

‘That only makes me all the more curious.’

‘Right then. Apart from his burning desire to get to the top, whatever the cost, even if it means bringing in a haunted house, Innstetten has a further passion: his actions always have an educational purpose behind them. He’s a born educator, he’s somewhere between Basedow* and Pestalozzi* (but closer to the Church than either), and he really belongs in Schnepfenthal or Bunzlau.’*

‘And he wants to educate me as well. Educate me with a ghost?’

‘Educate’s perhaps not the right word. But educate in a roundabout way.’

‘I don’t understand what you mean.’

‘A young wife’s a young wife and a Landrat’s a Landrat. He’s often driving round the district, and then the house is empty and unguarded. But a ghost like that is like a cherub with a flaming sword …’*

‘Oh, we’re out of the wood now,’ Effi said. ‘And there’s Utpatel’s mill. We just have to go past the churchyard.’

Soon they were riding through the sunken lane between the churchyard and the railed-off plot, and Effi looked over to the stone and the fir tree where the Chinaman was buried.

Chapter 17

It was two when they got back. Crampas took his leave and rode off into the town, to his home on the market square. Effi, for her part, changed her clothes and tried to get some sleep, but without success; her bad mood was worse than her tiredness. She could accept that Innstetten should have a ghost to hand so that he didn't live in an ordinary house, it fitted in with his tendency to set himself off from the crowd, but the other aspect, that he was using the ghost as a means of educating her, that was too much, was almost insulting. And 'means of education' was only the half of it, the lesser half, she was clear about that; what Crampas had suggested was much, much more, a device deliberately calculated to create fear. It was totally devoid of feeling, almost bordering on cruelty. She felt a rush of anger and clenched her little fist, determined to make plans; but all at once she had to laugh. 'Silly girl that I am. What guarantee do I have that Crampas is right? Crampas is amusing because he has a wicked tongue, but he's unreliable, just a coxcomb, and not a patch on Innstetten.'

At that moment Innstetten drove up, arriving back home earlier than usual. Effi jumped to her feet to be in the hall to greet him, and did so all the more affectionately as she felt she had something to make up for. But she couldn't quite get what Crampas had said out of her mind, and as she embraced him tenderly and listened to him with apparent interest, she kept hearing, 'So a ghost to serve his own purposes, a ghost to keep you in order,' going round and round inside her head.

Eventually she forgot that and listened to his stories without looking for some hidden insinuation.

*

By now it was the middle of November, and the north-westerly, that increased to gale force, blew against the breakwaters for a day and a half with such strength that the Kessine rose, overflowed the embankment, and poured down into the streets. But once it had had its fling the storm abated and there were a few more sunny, late-autumn days. 'Who knows how long they're going to last,' Effi said to Crampas, and so they decided to go out for a ride the next morning; Innstetten, who had a free day, decided to join them. They intended to go as far as the breakwater again, then dismount, have a short walk on the beach, and finally breakfast in the dunes, where they would be out of the wind.

Crampas arrived at the house at the agreed time. Kruse was already holding his mistress's horse; Effi quickly mounted, excusing Innstetten as she did so: he couldn't come, the previous night there had been a great fire in Morgnitz, the third in three weeks so it must be arson and he had to go out there, much to his disappointment, for he had really been looking forward to this ride that would probably be the last of the autumn.

Crampas expressed his regret, perhaps just for the sake of saying so or perhaps he really meant it, for however ruthless he could be in the matter of amorous adventures, he was equally a good comrade. Though that was quite superficial, of course. To help a friend and then cuckold him five minutes later caused no problem for his concept of honour. He would do both with unbelievable bonhomie.

As usual the ride took them through the Plantation. Rollo was in front again, then came Effi and Crampas, then Kruse.

'Where did you leave Knut?'

'He's got mumps.'

'How odd,' Effi laughed. 'Actually he always looks like that.'

'True. But you should see him now! Or better not. Mumps is infectious, you can catch it just by looking.'

'I don't believe it.'

'There are lots of things young women don't believe.'

'And then they believe lots of things it would be better they didn't.'

'Is that aimed at me?'

'No.'

'Pity.'

'That "pity" is so typical of you. I really believe you would think it quite in order if I made you a declaration of love, Major.'

'I wouldn't go that far. But I'd like to see the man who wouldn't hope for something like that. You can't legislate for thoughts and wishes.'

'That's open to question. And then there's a difference between thoughts and wishes. Thoughts are generally things that stay in the background, but wishes are mostly already on a person's lips.'

'Oh, don't put it like *that*, please.'

'Oh, Crampas, you're … you're …'

'A fool.'

'No. You're exaggerating again there. But you are something else. In Hohen-Cremmen we—me included—always used to say that the vainest thing on earth was an eighteen-year-old hussar ensign …'

‘And now?’

‘And now I say that the vainest thing on earth is a forty-two-year-old major in the district army reserve.’

‘… and the two years you are kind enough to take off my age compensate me for all the rest. I kiss your hand —’

‘As they say in Vienna. Yes, that’s an expression that suits you. I got to know the Viennese in Carlsbad four years ago, where they flirted with me, a girl of fourteen. The things I heard!’

‘I’m sure it was no more than was justified.’

‘If that were the case, then the things that were meant to flatter me were pretty impudent … But look at the buoys there, the way they bob and sway. The little red flags on them have been taken down. Whenever I saw the red flags, the few times this summer when I managed to get down to the beach, I said to myself: that’s where Vineta* is, that’s where it *must* be, those are the tops of the towers …’

‘That’s because you know Heine’s poem.’*

‘Which one?’

‘The one about Vineta.’

‘No, I don’t know it; I only know a few. Unfortunately.’

‘And that with Gieshübler and the journal-reading group! Though Heine did give the poem a different name, sea-ghost, or something like that. But he had Vineta in mind. And he himself—forgive me if I go on and tell you the story here and now—the poet that is, is lying on the deck of a ship as he passes the place and looks down and sees the narrow, medieval streets and women trotting along in poke bonnets, and they’re all carrying a hymn-book and going to church and all the bells are ringing. And when he hears that he’s filled with a yearning to go to church with them, if only because of the bonnets, and he cries out with longing and is about to throw himself into the sea. But at that moment the captain grabs his leg, saying, “Doctor, are you out of your mind?” ’

‘That sounds delightful. I’d like to read it. Is it long?’

‘No, it’s actually short, a little longer than “Diamonds and pearls thou hast” and “Your fingers white as lilies …” ’ so saying, he brushed her hand with his fingers. ‘But long or short, what descriptive power, what vividness! He’s my favourite poet and I know him off by heart, even though, apart from a few aberrations, I don’t much care for poetry. But it’s different with Heine: everything’s full of life, and above all he knows about love, which is, after all, the most important thing. Though he’s not one-sided about it …’

‘How do you mean?’

‘I mean he’s not just concerned with love …’

‘Well, even if he were one-sided in that way, it wouldn’t be the end of the world. What else does he concern himself with?’

‘He’s very much concerned with the romantic side of life, which of course comes immediately after love, indeed some people think it’s the same. I don’t agree there, for his later poems, the ones people have also called “romantic”—or actually he did so himself—these romantic poems are full of people being executed, though often enough for love. But mostly for other, cruder reasons; in that I include politics, that is almost always crude. In one of these romances, for example, Charles Stuart* is carrying his head underneath his arm, and the story of Vitzliputzli* is even worse …’

‘Of whom?’

‘Of Vitzliputzli. Vitzliputzli’s a Mexican god, and when the Mexicans captured twenty or thirty Spaniards those twenty or thirty had to be sacrificed to Vitzliputzli. There was no alternative, local customs, religion, and everything happened in an instant, belly open, heart out …’

‘No, Crampas, you mustn’t go on. That’s both unseemly and disgusting. And all that, more or less at the moment when we’re about to take breakfast.’

‘Personally I’m not influenced by it; my appetite is entirely dependent on the menu.’

During this exchange they had, according to plan, turned off from the beach to a bench, set up half in the shelter of the dunes, by an extremely primitive table, two posts supporting a board. Kruse, who had ridden on ahead, had already set the table; rolls and slices of cold roast meat, red wine to go with it, and beside the bottle two pretty, delicate, gold-rimmed glasses such as people buy at holiday resorts or take home as a souvenir from glassworks.

Now they dismounted. Kruse, who had wrapped the reins of his own horse round a dwarf pine, walked the two other horses up and down while Effi and Crampas sat down at the table that allowed them a view of the beach and breakwater through a narrow gap in the dunes.

The somewhat wintry November sun cast its pale light over a sea still rough from the storms, and the waves were high. Now and then a gust of wind blew the foam close to them. There was marram grass all around and, despite the similarity in colour, the bright yellow of the immortelles stood out sharply from the yellow sand in which they were growing. Effi did the honours. ‘I’m afraid I can only give you this cold roast beef, Major …’

‘At least it’s not the cold shoulder …’

‘… but Kruse forgot the cheese. Oh, there you are, Rollo. I’m afraid we haven’t brought anything for you. What are we going to do with Rollo?’

‘I think we should give him the lot; out of gratitude, as far as I’m concerned. For you see, dearest Effi …’

Effi gave him a look.

'… for you see, my dear Frau Baronin, Rollo has reminded me of what I was going to tell you as a follow-up to Vitzliputzli—only, being a love story, it's much more piquant. Have you ever heard of a certain Pedro the Cruel?'*

'Vaguely.'

'A kind of Bluebeard king.'

'That sounds good. We like hearing about that kind of person best of all; I can remember that we always used to say about my friend Hulda Niemeyer—you will have heard her name—that she knew nothing about history apart from the six wives of Henry VIII, that English Bluebeard, if the word is strong enough for him. And, really, she knew every last detail about them. And then you should have heard how she pronounced their names, especially the name of Elizabeth's mother*—she was so very embarrassed, as if *she* were the next on the list … But now the story of Don Pedro, please.'

'Right then: at Don Pedro's court there was a handsome, black-haired Spanish knight who bore the Cross of Calatrava on his chest—which is as good as the Black Eagle and the Pour le Mérite* put together. The cross was part of it, they had to wear it all the time, and this Knight of the Order of Calatrava, with whom the queen was naturally secretly in love …'

'Why naturally?'

'Because we're in Spain.'

'Oh, I see.'

'And this knight had an incredibly beautiful dog, a Newfoundland, although they didn't exist at the time, it was exactly a hundred years before the discovery of America. A beautiful dog, like Rollo, let's say …'

Hearing his name, Rollo barked and wagged his tail.

'So things went on for a while. But eventually the matter of the secret love, which probably wasn't entirely secret, became too much for the king, and because he couldn't really stand the knight—for he wasn't just cruel, he was also a jealous type—he decided to have the knight secretly executed because of his secret love.'

'I can't say I blame him.'

'I'm not sure about that, my dear. Listen. Some things are acceptable, but this was too much; to my mind the king went too far by a considerable distance. You see, he pretended he was going to arrange a banquet for the knight, because of his heroic deeds in the wars, and there was a long, long table with all the grandees sitting at it and the king in the middle; opposite him was the place for the man in whose honour it was being held, for the knight of the Order of Calatrava, that is. And because he still hadn't come, even though they'd waited quite a while, the festivities had to begin without him and there remained one empty seat—an empty seat opposite the king.'

'And then?'

'And now, my dear Frau Baronin, just imagine the king, this Pedro, standing up to express his hypocritical regret that his "beloved guest" had still not appeared, when shouts from the horrified servants could be heard on the stairs outside and, before anyone realized what was happening, something tore along the banquet table then jumped up on to the chair and put a head that had been chopped off on the empty place, and Rollo stared over the head at the man opposite, the king. Rollo had accompanied his master to the block, and the moment the axe came down the faithful hound had grasped the head as it fell, and there was our friend Rollo at the long table accusing the royal murderer.'

Effi had gone very still. Finally she said, 'In its way that's very beautiful, Crampas, and because it's beautiful, I forgive you. But it would be better, and more to my liking, if you told me different stories. Also by Heine. Heine won't have only written poems about Vitzliputzli and Don Pedro and *your* Rollo—for mine wouldn't have done something like that. Here, Rollo. You poor thing, I can't look at you without thinking of the knight of the Order of Calatrava, with whom the queen was secretly in love … Will you call Kruse, please, and get him to put these things back in the saddlebag, and as we ride back you must tell me something different, something very different …'

Kruse came. But as he was about to take the glasses Crampas said, 'Leave that glass, Kruse, that glass there. I'll take that one myself.'

'As you wish, Herr Major.'

Effi, who had heard this, shook her head. Then she laughed. 'What do you think you're doing, Crampas? Kruse's stupid enough not to give the matter further thought, and if he does, he'll see nothing in it, fortunately. But that doesn't give you the right to take this glass … this thirty-pfennig glass from the Josephine Glass Works …'

'That you give the price in such a mocking tone only increases its value for me all the more.'

'Ever the same. There's a lot of the jester about you, but a strange kind of one. If I understand correctly—it's ridiculous, and I'm almost too embarrassed to say it—you aim to play Goethe's King of Thule.'*

He nodded, with an arch expression.

'Well, as far as I'm concerned, you can. If the cap fits, wear it; you know which one I have in mind. But I must tell you that the role you have in mind for *me* doesn't suit me at all. I refuse to go round as a rhyme to the King of Thule. Keep the glass but, please, don't draw any conclusions that might compromise me from that. I shall tell Innstetten about it.'

‘That you will not do, my dear Frau Baronin.’
‘Why not?’
‘Innstetten is not the man to see such things the way they should be seen.’
She gave him a brief, sharp look. But then, confused and almost embarrassed, she lowered her gaze.

Chapter 18

Effi was dissatisfied with herself, and was glad that it had been decided the rides together should be discontinued for the whole of the winter. When she thought over the things that had been said, touched on, hinted at during all those weeks and days, she could find nothing for which she should actually reproach herself. Crampas was a clever man, experienced, amusing, free, free in a good sense as well, and it would have been petty and tedious if she had been stiff towards him and stuck strictly to the rules of propriety all the time. No, she couldn't blame herself for having fallen in with his tone, and yet she had a faint sense of having overcome a danger and congratulated herself that all of that was now presumably behind her. For it was unthinkable that they would see each other fairly frequently at home, the nature of the Crampas household made that as good as impossible, and meetings in the houses of the neighbouring noble families that were, of course, planned for the winter would be very rare and cursory. Effi worked all this out with growing satisfaction, eventually coming to the conclusion that giving up what she got out of her association with the Major would not be too great a loss. In addition to that, Innstetten told her his trips to Varzin would not take place that year, since the Prince was going to Friedrichsruh,* that he seemed to prefer more and more. From the one point of view, Innstetten said, he regretted that, from the other he was happy about it—he could now devote himself entirely to his family, and if she was agreeable, they could go through their Italian journey again with the notes he had made. To recapitulate it like that was the most important thing about a journey, only in that way could one assimilate it for good, only such later studies could make one fully and permanently aware of even things that one had only seen briefly, that one hardly realized had made any impression on one. He explained this in greater detail, adding that Gieshübler, who knew the 'Italian boot' right down to Palermo, had asked to be allowed to join them. Effi's response—she would have far, far preferred a perfectly ordinary evening's chat without the 'Italian boot' (even photographs were to be handed round)—was rather forced, but Innstetten, full of his plans, noticed nothing of that and went on, 'Of course there won't just be Gieshübler with us, Roswitha and Annie must be there too, and when I imagine that we're going up the Canal Grande and can hear the gondolieri singing in the distance, while not ten feet away Roswitha is bending over Annie and singing "Buhküken von Halberstadt"* or something like that, they'll be such lovely winter evenings, and you'll be sitting there knitting me a big winter nightcap. What do you say to that, Effi?'

These evenings were not merely planned, they actually started and would, in all probability, have gone on for many weeks had not poor innocent, harmless Gieshübler, despite his great aversion to anything of an equivocal nature, been the servant of two masters. One of them was Innstetten, the other Crampas. He had accepted the invitation to Innstetten's Italian evenings with genuine pleasure, if only for Effi's sake, but the pleasure with which he obeyed Crampas was even greater. Crampas had a plan to put on a production of the play *One False Step** before Christmas, and as the third Italian evening was approaching Gieshübler took the opportunity to discuss it with Effi, who had been chosen to play the role of Ella.

The effect on Effi was electrifying; what was Vicenza, Padua compared with that! Reheated fare meant nothing to Effi, it was fresh experiences, variety she longed for. But as if a voice were telling her 'Take care', she asked, elated as she was: 'Is it the Major who suggested this?'

'Yes. As you will know, Frau Baronin, he was voted unanimously on to the entertainments committee. We can finally look forward to a nice winter in the Club. He's just made for the role.'

'And will he have a part too?'

'No, he refused that. Unfortunately, I have to say. He can do anything, and would have made an excellent Arthur von Schmettwitz. He's just taken on the direction.'

'All the worse.'

'All the worse?' Gieshübler repeated.

'Oh, you mustn't take it so seriously. It's just a manner of speaking, that actually means the opposite. On the other hand, though, there is something overpowering about the Major, he does like to decide things without consulting you. And then you have to act the way he wants, not the way you want.'

She went on speaking, getting more and more tangled up in contradictions.

*

One False Step really did come about, and since they only had a fortnight (the last week before Christmas was ruled out), everyone made an effort and it went excellently; the actors, above all Effi, received loud applause. And Crampas did limit himself to directing and, however strict he was with all the others, interfered very little with Effi's interpretation during the rehearsals. Either Gieshübler must have said things to him about his conversation with Effi, or he had noticed himself the effort Effi made to keep apart from him. And he was intelligent enough, as one who understood women, not to disturb the natural development, of which, from all his experience, he was all too well aware.

The theatre evening in the club went on until late, and it was past midnight when Innstetten and Effi got home. Johanna was still up, in order to help, and Innstetten, who was more than a little proud of his young wife, told Johanna how lovely her mistress had looked and how well she had acted. Pity he hadn't thought of it earlier, but she and Christel and also the old toad, Frau Kruse, could have watched from the musicians' gallery; there had been a lot of people there. Then Johanna left, and Effi, who was tired, went to bed. Innstetten, however, who still wanted to chat, pulled over a chair and sat by his wife's bed, giving her a warm look and holding her hand.

'Yes, Effi, that was a lovely evening. It was a nice little play and I found it very amusing. And just imagine, the author's a Kammergerichtsrat,* it's hardly believable. And from Königsberg at that! But what pleased me most of all was my delightful little wife who charmed everyone.'

'Oh, don't say things like that, Geert, I'm vain enough as it is.'

'Vain enough, that's about right. But nowhere near as vain as the others. And that in addition to your seven charms* …'

'All women have seven charms.'

'A slip of the tongue; you can multiply the number by itself.'

'How gallant you are, Geert. If I didn't know you, I'd feel afraid. Or is there really something lurking behind it?'

'Have you got a guilty conscience? Been listening at the door yourself?'

'Oh, Geert, now I really am afraid.' She sat up in bed and stared at him. 'Should I ring for Johanna to bring us some tea? You do so like a cup before going to bed.'

He kissed her hand. 'No, Effi. Even the Kaiser can't demand a cup of tea after midnight, and you know I don't like making more demands on people than necessary. No, all I want to do is to look at you and feel happy that I have you. There are times when one is more strongly aware of what a treasure one has. You could be someone like poor Frau Crampas; an awful woman, can't be friendly to anyone, and she would have liked to wipe you off the face of the earth.'

'Oh, I beg you, Geert. You're imagining things again. The poor woman. I didn't notice anything.'

'Because you haven't got an eye for that kind of thing. But it was as I said, and poor Crampas was inhibited by it and kept avoiding you and hardly looked at you. Which was quite natural, for in the first place he's a real ladies' man, and then ladies like you are his particular passion. Which I'm willing to bet no one knows better than my little wife herself. When I think of the way the pair of you jabbered on—sorry—when he came on to the veranda in the mornings or when we rode along the beach or went for a walk on the breakwater. He's the kind of man I'm telling you, and today he'd lost his assurance, he was afraid of his wife. And I can't blame him. Frau Crampas is something like our Frau Kruse, and if I had to choose between the two of them I don't know which one it would be.'

'I would. There is a difference between the two of them. Poor Frau Crampas is unhappy, Frau Kruse is uncanny.'

'So you'd go for the unhappy one?'

'Definitely.'

'Now that's all a matter of taste. One can tell you've never been unhappy. And Crampas has a talent for disencumbering himself of his wife. He always finds some way of leaving her at home.'

'But she was there today.'

'Yes, today. There was no way round it. But I've arranged a visit to Ring, the senior forester, with him, Gieshübler, and the Pastor for the twenty-seventh, and you should have seen how cleverly he managed to prove that his wife had to stay at home.'

'Is it a men-only party?'

'Not at all. If it were, I'd say no thanks. You're invited and two or three other ladies, not counting those from the estates.'

'But then that's horrible of him, I mean of Crampas; there's always a price to pay for that kind of behaviour.'

'Yes, one day there will be. But I think our friend is one of those who doesn't lose any sleep over what's to come.'

'Do you think he's a bad man?'

'No, not bad. Almost the opposite, or at least he has his good side. But he's half Polish, you can't really rely on him, not in anything, least of all with women. A gambler. He doesn't gamble at the gaming-table but he's constantly taking chances in life, and you have to keep a close eye on him.'

'It's good of you to tell me that. I'll take care with him.'

'Do that. But not too much; then it won't be any use. Behaving naturally's always best, and of course the very best is strength of character and, if I may use such a strait-laced word, a pure soul.'

She looked at him, wide-eyed. Then she said, 'Yes, of course. But now don't say any more about all these things that don't cheer me up. D'you know, I feel I can hear the dancing upstairs. Strange that it keeps coming back. I thought you were only joking with all that stuff.'

'I wouldn't say that, Effi. But, either way, you just have to have a clear conscience and feel no need to be afraid.'

Effi nodded, and all at once what Crampas had said about her husband's passion for education came back to mind.

*

Christmas Eve came and went much as it had the previous year; presents and letters arrived from Hohen-Cremmen; Gieshübler presented his respects in a little poem, and Cousin Briest sent a card: a snowy landscape with telegraph poles and a little bird hunched up on the wire. And a tree was decorated for Annie, with candles that she reached out for and tried to grasp. Innstetten, relaxed and cheerful, seemed to be enjoying his domestic bliss and spent a lot of time with their child. Roswitha was amazed to see the master so tender and at the same time light-hearted. Effi too talked a lot and laughed a lot, but it didn't really come from the heart. She felt depressed and didn't know who to blame, Innstetten or herself. There was no Christmas-card from Crampas; on the one hand she was glad about that, on the other not; his attentions filled her with a certain apprehension, his indifference put her in a bad mood. She could see that things were not the way they ought to be.

'You're so restless,' Innstetten said after a while.

'Yes. Everyone's been so nice to me, you most of all; that depresses me because I feel I don't deserve it.'

'You shouldn't torment yourself like that, Effi. At the end of the day, the fact of the matter is that you get what you deserve.'

Effi listened closely to that, and her guilty conscience made her ask herself whether he had deliberately put it in such an ambiguous way.

Late in the afternoon Pastor Lindequist came to wish them a happy Christmas and to ask about the excursion to Uvagla Forest. It just had to be a sleigh-ride, of course. Crampas had offered him a seat in his sleigh, but neither the Major nor his servant, who would do the driving, as he did everything else, knew the way, therefore it would perhaps be a good idea to drive out in convoy with the Landrat's sleigh leading and Crampas's following. Probably Gieshübler's as well, for Mirambo, to whom their friend Alonzo had inexplicably decided to entrust the driving, was probably even less well acquainted with the route than the freckled Treptow uhlan. Innstetten, who was amused by these minor problems, was happy with Lindequist's suggestion and arranged that he would drive across the market square punctually at two and, without stopping, take the lead of the procession.

When the day came they proceeded according to that arrangement, and when Innstetten crossed the market square on the dot of two Crampas waved to Effi from his sleigh and then followed Innstetten's. The pastor was sitting beside him. Gieshübler's sleigh, with Gieshübler himself and Dr Hannemann, followed; Gieshübler was wearing an elegant buff-leather coat with marten trimmings, while the doctor had a bearskin coat that was thirty years old and showed its age. In his younger days Hannemann had been a ship's surgeon on a Greenland whaler. Mirambo sat in front, somewhat nervous because of his lack of experience in driving a sleigh, as Lindequist had suspected.

Two minutes later they were past Utpatel's mill.

Between Kessin and Uvagla (where, according to legend, there had once been a Wendish temple) there was a strip of woodland that was only about a thousand yards wide but must have been getting on for seven miles long; to the right of it was the sea, to the left a large, very fertile and well-cultivated piece of land stretching as far as the horizon. It was on this landward side that the three sleighs were now flying along, with, in front of them, a couple of old carriages that were most likely taking others who had been invited to the senior forester's house. One of these carriages was clearly recognizable by its old-fashioned high wheels as the one from Papenhagen. Of course. Güldenklee was considered the best speaker in the district (better than Borcke, yes, even better than Grasenabb), and his presence was essential on all festive occasions.

They drove quickly—the local gentry's coachmen were making a great effort as well and didn't want to be overtaken—and they had reached the senior forester's house by three. Ring, an imposing figure with a military look, who had fought in the first Schleswig campaign under Wrangel and Bonin[*] and distinguished himself at the storming of the Danewerk,[*] stood in the doorway to greet his guests who, after they'd taken off their coats and greeted his wife, first sat down at a long coffee-table on which there stood elaborate pyramids of cakes. Frau Ring was a very timorous, or at least very diffident, woman and showed these characteristics in the way she performed her duties as hostess, which visibly irritated the forester, for whom self-assurance and verve were of the utmost importance. Fortunately his irritation didn't lead to an outburst, for what his wife lacked, his daughters, pretty young girls of fourteen and thirteen who took after their father, had more than their fair share of. The older one in particular, Cora, immediately started flirting with Innstetten and Crampas, who both played along with her. Effi was annoyed at this, and then felt ashamed at being annoyed. She was sitting next to Sidonie von Grasenabb, and said, 'Strange, that was what I was like too when I was fourteen.'

Effi expected Sidonie to dispute that or at least express some reservations. Instead she said, 'I can well imagine.'

'And the way her father indulges her!' Effi went on, slightly embarrassed and only for the sake of saying something.

Sidonie nodded. 'That's the problem. No discipline. It's the mark of our age.'

Effi said nothing more.

They'd soon finished their coffee and stood up to take a half-hour walk in the surrounding woods, at first towards an enclosure where deer were fenced in. Cora opened the gate, and hardly had she gone in than the deer started coming towards her. It was actually delightful, just like in a fairy-story. But the young girl's vanity, her awareness of making a tableau, spoilt the impression, at least for Effi. 'No,' she said to herself, 'I wasn't like that. Perhaps I also lacked discipline, as this awful Sidonie just suggested, perhaps other things as well. At home they were too indulgent towards me, they loved me too much. But one thing I can say, I never put on airs. That was always Hulda's way. That's why I didn't like her when I saw her again this summer.'

On the way back from the woods it started to snow.

Crampas joined Effi, and said he was sorry he hadn't had the opportunity to say hello to her properly yet. Then, pointing to the large, heavy snowflakes that were falling, he said, 'If it goes on like this, we'll be snowed in here.'

'That wouldn't be the worst thing that could happen. For ages I've associated being snowed in with something pleasant, with a sense of protection and support.'

'I've never heard that before, Frau Baronin.'

'Yes,' Effi went on, trying to laugh, 'there's something odd about these ideas you get. You don't just get them from things you've experienced personally but also from something you've heard somewhere or happen to know by chance. You're very well-read, Major, but it seems to me there's one poem I know—not one by Heine, of course, not "Sea-ghost", not "Vitzliputzli"—that you don't. It's called "God's Wall",* and I learnt it off by heart many many years ago, when I was quite small, with our pastor in Hohen-Cremmen.'

' "God's Wall",' Crampas said. 'A nice title. What's it about?'

'It's a little story, a very short one. There was war somewhere, a winter campaign, and an old widow who was terribly afraid of the enemy prayed to God that He would "build a wall round her", to protect her from the enemy. Then God had the house snowed in and the enemy moved on past it.'

Crampas was visibly disconcerted by this, and changed the subject.

By the time it was getting dark, they were all back in the forester's house.

Chapter 19

They went to table as soon as the clock struck seven, and they were all delighted to see that the Christmas tree, a fir decorated with numberless silver balls, was lit again. Crampas, who had not been to the Rings' house before, was full of admiration. The damask cloth, the wine-coolers, the silver cutlery all looked as if it belonged to some grand family, well above the usual circumstances of a forester; the reason was that Ring's wife, shy and embarrassed though she was, came from the family of a rich Danzig corn merchant. That was also where most of the pictures hanging on the walls all round were from: the corn merchant and his wife, the refectory of Marienburg Castle,* and a good copy of the Memling* altarpiece in St Mary's in Danzig. Oliva Abbey* was represented twice, once in oils and once carved from cork. As well as these, there was over the sideboard a very much darkened portrait of old Nettelbeck* that came from the modest furnishings of Ring's predecessor, who had died only eighteen months ago. At the usual auction no one had wanted the picture of the old man until Innstetten, annoyed at this lack of respect, had made a bid. That had awakened Ring's patriotic feeling, and the man who had helped to organize the defence of Kolberg had remained in the forester's house.

The Nettelbeck picture was in a pretty poor state, but otherwise everything, as indicated, spoke of easy circumstances bordering on opulence, and the meal that was served was in line with that. Everyone enjoyed it to a greater or lesser degree, apart from Sidonie. She was sitting between Innstetten and Lindequist, and said, when she saw Cora, 'There's that insufferable brat again, that Cora. Just look at the way she's handing out the little wine-glasses, Innstetten, she's got it down to a T, she could become a waitress right away. Truly unbearable. And the looks your friend Crampas is giving her! You can see the path she's on already. I ask you, where will it lead?'

Innstetten, who actually agreed with her, found the tone in which it was expressed so offensively harsh that his reply was an ironic, 'Where will it lead, my dear Fräulein? I don't know that *either*,' at which Sidonie turned away from him and addressed Lindequist, who was on her left. 'Tell me, Pastor, does that fourteen-year-old coquette attend your classes?'

'Yes, Fräulein von Grasenabb.'

'Then you must forgive me for saying that you haven't been strict enough with her. I know that it's pretty difficult nowadays, but I also know that those who have responsibility for the young often don't take their task seriously enough. There's no two ways about it, it's the parents and teachers who are largely to blame.'

Lindequist, adopting the same tone as Innstetten, replied that that was all well and true, but the spirit of the times was too powerful.

'The spirit of the times!' Sidonie said. 'Don't start going on about that. I can't stand it, it's the expression of the worst kind of weakness, a declaration of moral bankruptcy. I know what it means: never wanting to seem too harsh, always avoiding uncomfortable issues. For duty is uncomfortable. Thus it's all too easy to forget that the time will come when the talents we have been given will be demanded back from us. Take action, my dear Pastor, discipline. The flesh is weak,* of course, but …'

At that moment an English-style roast loin of beef arrived, of which Sidonie took a substantial helping, without noticing Lindequist's smile as she did so. And since she didn't notice that, it was no surprise that she continued unabashed where she'd left off. 'And that's why everything you see here is the way it has to be; everything is on the wrong track from the very start. Ring, Ring—if I'm not mistaken there was a king of that name in a saga in Sweden* or somewhere round there. Now look, isn't he behaving as if he were descended from him; and his mother, whom I knew, was a laundrywoman in Köslin.'*

'I can't see anything bad in that.'

'Anything bad? Neither can I. There are certainly things that are worse. But I must, at the very least, expect you, as an ordained servant of the Church, to accept the social order. A senior forester is only a little more than a forester, and a forester doesn't have such wine-coolers and silver; that's all unseemly, and the result is children growing up like this Fräulein Cora.'

Sidonie, ever ready to prophesy terrible happenings when the spirit came upon her and she poured out her wrath, would have worked herself up into a Cassandra-like* vision of the future if, at that very moment, the steaming bowl of punch—with which Christmas gatherings at Ring's house always ended—had not appeared on the table, accompanied by crinkly cracknel cleverly piled up, even higher than the pyramid of cakes that had been served with the coffee several hours ago. And now Ring himself, who had kept somewhat in the background until then, went into action with beaming ceremony and started to fill the glasses in front of him, large, cut-glass goblets, in curving jets, a virtuoso demonstration of how to fill a wine-glass that Frau von Padden, unfortunately absent that day, had, with her ready wit, once called 'glass-filling *en cascade à la Ring*'. The wine poured out in an amber curve, and not a drop was to be spilt—as was the case again that day. But at the end, when everyone was holding their due—including Cora, who, with her amber curls, had sat down on 'Uncle Crampas's' lap—old Güldenklee from Papenhagen rose, in order, as was usual at these festivities, to

propose a toast to his beloved senior forester.

'There are many rings,' he began, 'growth rings, curtain rings, wedding rings, and as far as engagement rings are concerned—surely that is a topic we can broach—I am happy to say that it is guaranteed that one of them will be seen in this house in the very near future, adorning the ring-finger (and in this case a ring-finger in two senses) of a pretty little hand …'

'Outrageous,' Sidonie whispered to Lindequist.

'Yes, my friends,' Güldenklee went on, raising his voice, 'there are many rings, and there is even a story we all know called the story of the three rings,* a Jewish story that, like all the liberal poppycock, has done nothing but create confusion and mischief. May God put things to rights. And now, so as not to take up too much of your patience and forbearance, let me close. I am *not* for these three rings, my dear friends, rather I am for *one* Ring, for a Ring that is a real ring, the way a ring ought to be, a Ring that has gathered together at his hospitable table everything that is good in this old Pomeranian district of Kessin, everyone that still stands up with God for king and country—and there are still a few of those left' (loud cheers). 'I am all for *that* Ring. Three cheers for him.'

They all joined in and crowded round Ring, who for the moment had to hand over the task of glass-filling *en cascade* to Crampas; but the children's tutor got up from his place at the bottom of the table, rushed over to the piano, and played the opening bars of the Prussian national anthem, at which everyone stood up and solemnly joined in: 'A Prussian I am … a Prussian I will be.'*

'That is really beautiful,' old Borcke said to Innstetten after the first verse, 'other countries don't have anything like that.'

'No,' said Innstetten, who didn't have much time for that kind of patriotism, 'other countries have other things.'

They sang every verse, by which time the carriages had been brought round and they all immediately rose so as not to keep the horses waiting. In Kessin district this 'consideration for the horses' took priority over everything else. In the hall were two pretty maids—Ring was particular about that—to help the guests on with their furs. Everyone was in a merry mood, some more than that, and it looked as if getting into the various vehicles would go quickly and with no hold-ups, when it suddenly turned out that Gieshübler's sleigh wasn't there. Gieshübler was much too well-bred to show nerves or make a fuss; finally, however, because someone had to say something, Crampas asked what had actually happened.

'Mirambo can't drive,' Ring's groom said, 'when he was hitching up the horses the left-hand one kicked him on the shin. He's lying down in the stable, howling.'

They of course called for Dr Hannemann, who went out and returned five minutes later to inform them, with a true surgeon's impassiveness, 'Yes, Mirambo will have to stay here. For the moment all he needs to do is lie still and rest. It's nothing serious.' That was a relief, but it didn't solve the question of how Gieshübler's sleigh was to be driven back, until Innstetten said he would take Mirambo's place and see that the medical pair—doctor and chemist—got safely home. His offer was accepted, with laughter and all sorts of jokes about this most obliging Landrat who, in order to be of assistance, would even leave his young wife behind, and Innstetten, with Gieshübler and Hannemann in the back, once more headed the procession. Crampas and Lindequist followed immediately behind. Then, when Kruse drove up with the sleigh, Sidonie came over to Effi and asked whether she could travel with her, since there was now a free place. 'It's always so stuffy in our carriage; my father likes it like that. And anyway, I'd like to have a chat with you. But only as far as Quappendorf. I'll get out at the junction with the track to Morgnitz, then I'll have to get back into our uncomfortable carriage. And Papa smokes into the bargain.'

Effi was not terribly pleased at this request and would have preferred to do the drive alone; but she had little choice and so Sidonie Grasenabb climbed in, and hardly had the two ladies taken their seats than Kruse cracked his whip and they set off from the forestry ramp, which had a splendid view of the sea, down the fairly steep dune towards the shore-path that went, almost dead straight for four and a half miles, to the Beach Hotel in Kessin and, turning right into the Plantation, to the town. The snow had stopped falling a few hours ago, the air was fresh, and the dull light of the crescent moon fell on the darkening expanse of the sea. Kruse drove close to the water, sometimes cutting through the foam of the incoming tide, and Effi, shivering a little, wrapped her coat tighter around her. She remained silent, and that intentionally. She knew very well that all that about the 'stuffy carriage' was merely a pretext, and Sidonie had only joined her because she had something unpleasant to say to her. And that would come soon enough. As well as that, she was really tired, perhaps from the walk in the woods, perhaps also from Ring's punch, of which, urged on by Frau von Flemming who was sitting next to her, she had partaken freely. So she pretended to be asleep, closed her eyes, and leant her head more and more over to the left.

'You mustn't lean over so far to the left, Frau Baronin. If the sleigh goes over a stone you'll fly out. Your sleigh has no leather guard-flaps as it is, and, as I can see, not even the hooks for them.'

'I can't stand the guard-flaps, there's something so prosaic about them. And then I'd be quite happy to fly out, most of all straight into the waves. A rather cold bath, true, but so what … ? By the way, can you hear something?'

'No.'

‘Can’t you hear something like music?’

‘An organ?’

‘No, not an organ. I’d imagine it was the sea, but it’s something different, an immensely soft sound, almost like a human voice …’

‘They’re hallucinations,’ Sidonie said, thinking the right moment had come. ‘You’re suffering from some nervous disorder. You hear voices. God grant it’s the right voices you hear.’

‘I can hear … of course I know it’s silly, otherwise I’d imagine I’d heard the mermaids singing. But, please, what’s that? There’s something flashing right up into the sky. It must be the Northern Lights.’

‘Yes,’ Sidonie said. ‘You’re behaving as if it were one of the wonders of the world, Frau Baronin. It isn’t. And even if it were, we have to beware of nature worship. Though we are truly fortunate that we’ve avoided the danger of hearing our good forester, that most vain of all mortals, talk about the Northern Lights. I bet he’d imagine the heavens were doing him the favour of making his festivities even more festive. He’s a fool. Güldenklee should have better things to do than laud him like that. And he makes a big thing of his support for the church, recently he donated an altar-cloth. Perhaps Cora did some of the embroidery. These false Christians are to blame for everything, for their worldliness is always on the surface and is also attributed to those who are serious about the salvation of their souls.’

‘Yes, it’s so difficult see into a person’s heart.’

‘Yes, it is. But with some people it’s also quite easy.’ And with that she gave her young companion a look that was almost rude in its insistence.

Effi said nothing and turned away impatiently.

‘With some people, as I say, it’s quite easy,’ Sidonie repeated. She had reached her goal and went on with a quiet smile, ‘And our senior forester is one of those easy puzzles. I feel sorry for anyone who brings up his children like that, but the good thing about it is that with him everything is clear to see. And as it is with him, so it is with his daughters. Cora will go to America and become either a millionairess or a Methodist preacher; in one way or another she’ll be lost. I have never before seen a fourteen-year-old girl …’

At that moment the sleigh halted, and when the two looked round to see what was the matter, they saw that on their right, about thirty yards away, the two other sleighs had also stopped—Innstetten’s farther away, Crampas’s closer.

‘What is it?’ Effi asked.

Half turning round, Kruse said, ‘The Schloon, Madam.’

‘The Schloon? What’s that? I can’t see anything.’

Kruse shook his head from side to side, as if to say the question was more easily asked than answered. And he was right about that, for you couldn’t say what the Schloon was in a couple of words. But help for Kruse quickly arrived from Sidonie Grasenabb, who knew about everything in the area, and that included the Schloon.

‘Yes, Frau Baronin,’ Sidonie said, ‘that’s pretty bad. It doesn’t matter much for me, I’ll get through easily when the carriages arrive. They have high wheels and, moreover, our horses are used to it. But it’s different with these sledges, they’d sink into the Schloon, so you’ll have to make a detour, whether you like it or not.’

‘Sink! Please, Fräulein, I’m still not clear about what it is. Is the Schloon an abyss or something, where you go down with all hands? I can’t imagine anything like that around here.’

‘And yet it is something like that, only in miniature, of course. This Schloon is actually just a sluggish little runnel coming down from Lake Gothen and creeping through the dunes. In summer it sometimes dries out completely, and you can easily drive across and not even notice it.’

‘And in winter?’

‘Well, in winter it’s a different proposition; not always, but often. Then it turns into a slough.’

‘My God, what words and names you have here!’

‘… Then it turns into a slough, and is worst when the wind comes off the sea. Then the wind forces the seawater into the little runnel, but not so that you can see it. And that’s the worst thing about it, that’s where the real danger lies. All this is happening underground, and the sand on the beach is saturated with water to quite a depth. And if you try to cross one of these stretches of sand, that isn’t sand any more, you sink in as if it were a swamp or a quagmire.’

‘I know that kind of thing,’ Effi said animatedly, ‘it’s like in the Marshes at home.’ And for all her anxiety she suddenly felt a kind of wistful joy.

As this conversation went on, Crampas had alighted from his sleigh and gone over to Gieshübler’s, that was farthest to the right, in order to discuss what was to be done with Innstetten. Knut, he told him, was all for attempting the crossing, but Knut was stupid and didn’t understand the matter at all; the decision should be left to those who were at home here. Innstetten—very much to Crampas’s surprise—was also for risking it; it definitely had to be attempted again … it was the same old story every time: people here had a superstition and that made them afraid, even though there was really nothing to it. Not Knut, he wasn’t familiar with it, but Kruse should have a go, and Crampas was to get in with the ladies (there was a small dickey) to be at hand should the sleigh tip over. After all, that was the worst thing that could happen.

Crampas went over to the ladies with Innstetten’s message, and once he had informed them, with a laugh, of this arrangement, followed orders and sat himself on the little seat—it was actually nothing more than a plank

covered with cloth—and called out, ‘Off we go now, Kruse.’

Kruse had already taken the horses back a hundred yards, and hoped by working up to a good speed to be able to get the sleigh across; but the moment the horses just touched the Schloon they sank up to their fetlocks in the sand, and it was only with great difficulty that they managed to back out again.

‘Impossible,’ Crampas said, and Kruse nodded.

Whilst all this was going on the carriages had finally arrived, the Grasenabbs’ in the lead, and once Sidonie, with a brief word of thanks to Effi, had taken her rear seat, opposite her father, who was smoking his Turkish pipe, the carriage headed for the Schloon without further ado; the horses sank in deep, but the wheels allowed them to overcome the danger easily, and within half-a-minute the Grasenabbs were trotting along on the other side. The other carriages followed, and it was not without some envy that Effi watched them go. But not for long, for by this time a solution had been found for those in the sleighs; Innstetten had simply given up all idea of forcing a crossing and decided on the more tranquil alternative of a detour. That is, precisely what Sidonie had predicted from the start. From the right came the Landrat’s clear instruction to stay on that side for the time being and to follow him through the dunes to a wooden bridge farther upstream.

Once both drivers, Kruse and Knut, had been given their instructions, the Major, who had got down from the sleigh with Sidonie in order to help her, came back to Effi and said, ‘I cannot leave you by yourself, Frau Baronin.’

For a moment Effi was uncertain what to do, but then she quickly moved over to the other side and Crampas got in and sat on her left.

All this could perhaps have been misinterpreted, but Crampas knew women too well simply to feel flattered by it. He clearly saw that Effi’s reaction was the only right thing to do, given the way things stood. It was impossible for her to refuse to allow him into the sleigh. And so they flew along behind the other two, always close beside the watercourse, with the dark mass of trees towering up on the other bank. Effi looked across, assuming that later on the ride would continue along the landward edge of the woods, that is, on the same track they had taken in the afternoon. But in the meantime Innstetten had formed a different plan, and immediately his sleigh had crossed the wooden bridge, instead of choosing the route outside the woods he turned on to a narrower track that went through the middle of the dense mass of trees. Effi started in fright. Until then there had been light and air all around, but now that was gone and the dark crowns of the trees were bending over her. She started to shiver and clasped her fingers tight together to keep herself under control. Thoughts and images flashed through her mind, and one of those images was the old woman in the poem called ‘God’s Wall’, and just like the old woman she now prayed that God would build a wall round her. She muttered it two or three times, but all at once she felt they were empty words. She was afraid, yet at the same time was under a spell she didn’t want to break.

‘Effi.’ The word was whispered softly in her ear and she could hear that his voice was trembling. Then he took her hand and released her fingers, that she was still clutching tight, and covered them with hot kisses. She felt she was about to faint.

When she opened her eyes again they were out of the woods, and not far in front she could hear the jingle of the sleighs racing along ahead of them. It became more and more audible, and when, just before Utpatel’s mill, they turned off the dunes, the little houses with their snow-covered roofs were on either side of them.

Effi looked round, and one moment later the sleigh had stopped outside Innstetten’s house.

Chapter 20

The next morning Innstetten, who had given Effi a sharp look as he lifted her out of the sleigh but avoided any reference to the strange ride the two had had together, was up early and tried as far as possible to get over his continuing bad mood.

'You slept well?' he asked when Effi came for breakfast.

'Yes.'

'Good for you. I can't say the same for myself. I dreamt you and the sleigh had fallen into the Schloon and Crampas was trying to save you; I have to call it that, but he sank down with you.'

'You're saying that in such an odd way, Geert. There's a reproach behind it and I suspect I know why.'

'Very strange.'

'You're not happy that Crampas came and offered to help us.'

'Us?'

'Yes, us. Sidonie and me. You must have completely forgotten that it was you who sent the Major. And once he was sitting opposite me on that wretched little plank, should I have thrown him out when the Grasenabbs arrived and the drive continued immediately? I'd have looked ridiculous, and you're so sensitive to that. Just remember that we've often been out riding together, with your agreement, and now I'm not supposed to go in a sleigh together with him? At home we were always told it's wrong to treat a noble gentleman with distrust.'

'A noble gentleman?' Innstetten said, emphasizing the first word.

'Is he not one? You yourself called him a gentleman, even a perfect gentleman.'

'Yes,' Innstetten said, his voice taking on a friendlier tone, though it still had a touch of mockery, 'a gentleman, he is that, and a perfect gentleman, he certainly is that. But a noble gentleman? My dear Effi, a noble gentleman is a quite different kettle of fish. Have you noticed anything noble about him? I haven't.'

Effi stared at the floor and said nothing.

'So we're of the same opinion, it seems. Though, as you said, it's my own fault; I wouldn't call it a *faux pas*, it's not a good word to use in such a context. So it's my fault and it won't happen again, if I have anything to do with it. But you too, if you'll take my advice, should take care. He's a man who can be ruthless and has his own views about young women. I know him from the old days.'

'I'll bear that in mind. But I will say that I think you misjudge him.'

'I do not misjudge him.'

'Nor me,' she said, making an effort and trying to look him in the eye.

'You neither, my dear Effi. You're a charming little woman but steadfastness is not your strong point.'

He stood up to leave. As he reached the door, Friedrich came in with a note from Gieshübler. It was addressed to the Frau Baronin, of course.

Effi took it. 'A secret correspondence with Gieshübler,' she said. 'Grounds for more jealousy from my stern lord and master. Or not?'

'No, not at all, my dear Effi. I am foolish enough to make a difference between Crampas and Gieshübler. They are not of the same carat—carat is used as a unit to measure the fineness of gold, and sometimes of people as well. And I might add that personally I much prefer Gieshübler's white cravats, even though no one wears them any more, to Crampas's ginger moustache. But I doubt whether that corresponds to women's taste.'

'You think we're weaker than we are.'

'A comfort that is, in practice, of exceptional insignificance. But let's leave that. Read your note instead.'

And Effi read it out:

'May I ask how you are, Frau Baronin? I do know that you safely avoided the Schloon, but there were dangers enough driving through the woods. Dr Hannemann has just returned from Uvagla and reassured me as to Mirambo's condition; yesterday, he said, he felt the matter was more serious than he liked to admit to us, but not now. It was a delightful drive.—In three days' time it will be New Year's Eve. We will have to do without a celebration such as we had last year, but there will be a ball, of course, and to see you there will delight all the assiduous dancers, not least your devoted servant,

Alonzo G.'

Effi laughed. 'What do you say to that?'

'Still the same: that I prefer to see you with Gieshübler than with Crampas.'

'Because you take Crampas too seriously and Gieshübler not seriously enough.'

Innstetten playfully wagged his finger at her.

*

Three days later it was New Year's Eve. Effi appeared in a delightful ball-gown that had been among the Christmas presents. She didn't dance, however, but took her place among the old ladies for whom armchairs had

been put out close to the musicians' platform. None of the Innstettens' preferred acquaintances among the noble families was there, because of a little disagreement with the Club committee, who were based in the town and, according to old Güldenklee, had once more been guilty of 'destructive tendencies'; three or four other noble families, however, who were not members of the Club but always just invited guests, since their estates lay on the other side of the Kessine, had come, in some cases from a great distance away, across the frozen river, delighted to be able to attend the ball. Effi was sitting between the wife of old Ritterschaftsrat von Padden and a somewhat younger Frau von Titzewitz. Frau von Padden, a superb old lady, was an original in every respect and strove to compensate for what nature had made of her, especially with her pronounced cheekbones, on the heathen Wendish side, with a Teutonic strictness of Christian belief that made even Sidonie von Grasenabb look like a kind of freethinker. On the other hand, she was endowed—perhaps because she united the Radegast and Swantowit* lines of the family—with the old Padden sense of humour, with which the family had been blessed since days of yore, and which gave heartfelt pleasure to anyone who came into contact with them, even their opponents in matters of church and state.

'Now then, child,' Frau von Padden said, 'how are you actually?'

'Well, Frau Ritterschaftsrätin; I have an excellent husband.'

'I know. But that doesn't always help. I also had an excellent husband. How are things here? No temptations?'

Effi was alarmed and, at the same time, in a way moved. There was something uncommonly refreshing about the free and natural manner in which the old lady spoke, and the fact that it was such a pious woman made it even more refreshing.

'Oh, Frau Ritterschaftsrätin …'

'There you are. I'm familiar with that. It's always the same. Times never change as far as that's concerned. And perhaps it's a good thing too. For what's important, my dear young lady, is the fight you put up. One has to wrestle with the natural man inside one all the time. And when you've got yourself pinned down and almost feel like crying because it hurts so much, then the angels above rejoice.'

'Oh, Frau von Padden. It's often very difficult.'

'Of course it's difficult. But the more difficult, the better. You should be happy about that. All that with the flesh never goes away, it stays with us; I have children and grandchildren, so I see it every day. But to conquer yourself in faith, that's the important thing, that's the true victory. That's what our old Martin Luther, our man of God, made clear. Do you know his *Table Talk*?'*

'No, Frau Ritterschaftsrätin.'

'I'll send it to you.'

At that point Major Crampas came over to Effi and asked if he might enquire how she was. Effi blushed furiously, but before she could reply Crampas said, 'May I ask you, Frau Baronin, to introduce me to the ladies?'

Effi now did so. He, for his part, was already completely *au fait* and, chatting easily, went through all the Paddens and Titzewitzes he had ever heard of. At the same time he apologized for not having yet visited the families on the other side of the Kessine and introduced his wife to them; but it was strange, he concluded, the divisive power that water had. It was just the same as with la Manche Channel …

'What?' old Frau Titzewitz asked.

Crampas, clearly thinking there was no point in going into explanations that would get them nowhere, went on, 'Of twenty Germans who go to France there's not one goes to England. It's the water that does that; I repeat, water has the power to separate.'

Frau von Padden who, with her keen instinct, suspected there was something suggestive behind this, was going to speak up for water, but Crampas went on in full flow, drawing the ladies' attention to the beautiful Fräulein von Stojentin, who was 'without doubt the queen of the ball,' this said with an admiring glance at Effi. Then, with a bow that included all three, he quickly took his leave.

'A handsome fellow,' said Frau von Padden. 'Is he on visiting terms with you?'

'Occasional.'

'A really handsome fellow,' Frau von Padden repeated. 'A little too sure of himself. And pride comes before a fall … But just look there, he really is going to dance with Grete Stojentin. He's actually too old for her, at least in his mid-forties.'

'He'll be forty-four at his next birthday.'

'Indeed! You seem to know him well.'

*

It suited Effi very well that, right from the beginning, the new year brought all kinds of excitement. Since New Year's Eve a sharp north-easterly had been blowing, that in the days following increased almost to a gale, and on the afternoon of the 3rd of January word came that a ship had not made the entrance to the harbour and was stranded a hundred yards from the breakwater; it was, they said, an English ship, from Sunderland, with, as far as they could tell, seven men on board. Despite all their efforts the pilots couldn't get round the breakwater, and to launch a boat from the beach was out of the question. That sounded pretty sad, but Johanna, who had brought the news, had something reassuring to add: Consul Eschrich was already on the way with his life-saving

equipment and rockets, and he'd surely manage to rescue them; the distance wasn't quite as far as in '75, when it had worked; they'd even saved the poodle then, and it had been really touching to see how happy the dog had been, how it had kept licking the captain's wife and the dear little child, not much bigger than Annie, with its red tongue.

'I've got to go out, Geert, I've got to see this,' Effi had immediately said, and both of them set off at once so as not to be too late. And they arrived just at the right moment, for as they came out of the Plantation on to the beach they heard the first shot and quite clearly saw the rocket with the line attached fly across below the storm-clouds and come down on the other side of the ship. All hands on board immediately got into action and used the line to pull up the heavy rope with the breeches-buoy, and it wasn't long before the buoy returned and one of the sailors, a slim, very attractive man in a sou'wester, was safely on the shore and being plied with questions, while the buoy set off again, bringing a second, then a third sailor, and so on. All were rescued, and as Effi went back home with her husband half an hour later she could have thrown herself down in the dunes and had a good cry. She felt light of heart once more and was immensely happy that that was so.

That had been on the third. And on the fifth there was already more excitement, though of a different kind, to be sure. Innstetten had met Gieshübler, who was, of course, a member of the municipal council, as he came out of the town hall, and had learnt from him that the Ministry of War had asked the town authorities how they would feel about a garrison being stationed there. If they were willing to cooperate, that is, prepared to build the stables and barracks, they could be allocated two companies of hussars. 'Well, Effi, what do you say to that?'—Effi seemed dazed. At once her mind was filled with the innocent joys of her childhood, and straight away she felt as if red hussars—for they were also red ones, like those at home in Hohen-Cremmen—were the true guardians of paradise and innocence. And still she remained silent.

'You're not saying anything, Effi.'

'Yes, strange, isn't it, Geert. But it makes me feel so happy, I can't say anything for joy. Will it really happen? Will they really come?'

'Well, there's a long way to go yet, Gieshübler even thought his colleagues, the elders of the town, didn't deserve it. Instead of simply being united in their appreciation of the honour or, if not the honour, then the advantage, he told me they were full of ifs and buts and niggling about the expense of the new buildings; Michelsen, the confectioner, even went so far as to say the hussars would corrupt the morals of the town, and anyone who had a daughter should be on his guard and install bars over their windows.'

'It's beyond belief. I've never seen such well-mannered people as our hussars; really Geert. Well, you know that yourself. And now this Michelsen wants to put bars over everything. Does he have daughters?'

'Yes. Three in fact. But they're all of them *hors concours*.'

Effi laughed more heartily than she had for a long time. But it didn't last long, and when Innstetten went out, leaving her by herself, she sat down by the child's cradle and her tears fell on the pillows. She was overcome with feelings of guilt again and felt as if she were imprisoned and couldn't escape.

They made her suffer and she wanted to free herself from them, but although she was capable of strong feelings, she wasn't a strong character, she lacked the persistence, and all her good intentions would fade away. So she just drifted on, at first because she couldn't change things, then because she didn't want to change them. Forbidden, secret desires had her in their power.

Thus it came about that Effi, free and open by nature, more and more came to live a life in which she was acting out a part. Only in one thing did she stay true to herself: she saw everything clearly and didn't try to gloss over anything. Once she went over to the mirror in her bedroom in the late evening. The lights and shadows flitted to and fro; Rollo barked outside, and at that moment she felt as if someone were looking over her shoulder. But she quickly recovered. 'I know what it is. It wasn't *him*,' she said pointing to the haunted room upstairs, 'it was something else … my conscience … you're lost, Effi.' But things went on as they were, the ball had started to roll, and what happened one day determined what was done on the next.

Around the middle of the month invitations arrived to visits out in the country. The four families who were the Innstettens' preferred company had come to an agreement about the order: the Borckes to begin with, then the Flemmings and the Grasenabbs, finishing with the Güldenklees; with a week between each. All four invitations arrived on the same day; the purpose was clearly to give the impression of an orderly and well-thought-out process, also presumably of a special bond of friendship.

'I won't be going with you, Geert, and you must excuse me right away because of the course of treatment I've been undergoing for weeks now …'

Innstetten laughed. 'Treatment. I'm to blame the course of treatment. That's the pretext, the fact is, you don't want to go.'

'No, it's more honest than you're willing to allow. You were the one who wanted me to consult the doctor. I did so, and now I must follow his advice. Oddly enough, the good doctor thinks I'm anaemic, and you know that I drink some of the chalybeate water every day. And then if you imagine a dinner at the Borckes' on top of that, perhaps with brawn or eel in aspic, it must make you feel it would be the death of me. And you surely won't want that to happen to your Effi. Though I have to say, I sometimes feel …'

'Please, Effi …'

'But the one good thing about this is that every time you drive out I can look forward to accompanying you

for a short distance, certainly as far as the mill or to the churchyard or even to the corner of the woods, where the side-road to Morgnitz starts. Then I'll get out and stroll back. It's always nicest in the dunes.'

Innstetten was happy with that, and when the carriage was brought round three days later Effi got in and accompanied her husband as far as the corner of the woods. 'Get Kruse to stop here, Geert. You'll be going off to the left, I'll go to the right, as far as the beach then back through the Plantation. It's quite long, but not too long. Dr Hannemann is always telling me exercise is everything, exercise and fresh air. And I almost think he's right. Give my best wishes to everyone, only you needn't bother with Sidonie.'

The drives on which Effi accompanied her husband to the corner of the woods were repeated each week; but even on the days in between, Effi was conscientious in following the doctor's orders strictly. Not a day passed without her taking the prescribed walk, mostly in the afternoon, when Innstetten would immerse himself in the newspapers. The weather was fine, the air mild and fresh, the sky overcast. Usually she went alone, and would say to Roswitha, 'Roswitha, I'm going down the high-road now and then to the right at the square with the merry-go-round; I'll wait there for you to come and join me. We'll come back along the beech avenue or the Reeperbahn. But only come if Annie's asleep. If she isn't asleep, send Johanna. Or no, don't bother, it's not necessary, I can find the way myself.'

The first day that arrangement was made, they did actually meet. Effi was sitting on a bench against the side of a long wooden shed and looking across at a low, half-timbered building, yellow, with the beams painted black, an inn for the common people, who were having a glass of beer there or playing cards. It was hardly beginning to get dark but the windows were already lit, and a shimmer of light fell from them onto the piles of snow and a few trees on one side. 'Look, Roswitha, isn't it beautiful?' That went on for a few days, but then when Roswitha came to the merry-go-round and the shed there would be no one there, and as she entered the hall when she came back Effi would greet her with, 'Where have you been, Roswitha? I've been back for ages.'

So the weeks passed. The proposal about the hussars had as good as fallen through because of the difficulties the townspeople made; but since the negotiations had not yet been finally broken off and were now going through another department, the High Command, Crampas had been summoned to Stettin, where they wanted to hear what he had to say about the matter. On his second day there he wrote to Innstetten, 'Forgive me for taking French leave, Innstetten. Everything went so quickly. And to be honest, I'll try and spin the business out, I'm glad to get away for once. Give my best wishes to your charming lady wife.'

He read it out to Effi. She remained calm. Finally she said, 'It's much better like that.'

'How do you mean?'

'That he's away. He's always saying the same things. When he's back, at least for a while he'll have something new to tell us.'

Innstetten gave her a quick, sharp look, but he saw nothing and his suspicion subsided. 'I'm going away too,' he said after a while, 'to Berlin, even. Perhaps then, like Crampas, I can bring back something new. My darling Effi always wants to hear something new, she gets bored in our dear old town of Kessin. I'll be away for about a week, perhaps a day more. But don't be afraid … it will surely not come back again … you know, that up there … And if it does, you have Rollo and Roswitha.'

Effi smiled to herself, and there was a touch of melancholy about it. The day came back to mind when Crampas had first told her that Innstetten was acting out a part with the business of the ghost and her fear. The great educator! But was he not right? Was his play-acting not warranted? And all kinds of conflicting thoughts, good and bad, went through her mind.

Three days later Innstetten left.

He had said nothing about what he intended to do in Berlin.

Chapter 21

Innstetten had been away four days when Crampas returned from Stettin with the news that the powers that be had decided to abandon for good the idea of stationing two companies of cavalry in Kessin; there were so many small towns that would be keen to have a cavalry garrison, especially one of Blücher's Hussars,* that they were accustomed to such offers being met with a welcoming rather than a hesitant response. When Crampas informed them of this, the town council looked rather abashed; only Gieshübler was jubilant, but that was because he was happy to see the petty-bourgeois attitudes of his colleagues suffer a defeat. The news caused a certain amount of disgruntlement among the common folk, and even some consuls with daughters were unhappy with it for a while; in general, however, they quickly got over the matter, perhaps because the inhabitants, or at least the notables, were more interested in the question of 'what Innstetten was up to in Berlin'. They didn't want to lose the Landrat, who was well liked, but there were wild rumours about the matter that Gieshübler had, if not invented, then certainly embellished and passed on. Amongst other things, it was said that Innstetten was to lead a legation to Morocco, one with presents that included not just the usual vase with pictures of Sanssouci* and the New Palace but above all a large ice-making machine. The latter seemed so plausible, given the temperatures in Morocco, that the rumour as a whole was believed.

Effi heard it as well. The days when it would have amused her were not that far back, but the mood she had been in since the end of the year made it impossible for her to laugh uninhibitedly at such things. The expression on her face had changed completely, and the partly touching, partly roguish childlike aspect that she had retained as a woman had gone. The walks to the beach and the Plantation, that she had given up while Crampas was in Stettin, were resumed once he returned, and she wasn't even put off by bad weather. As before, Roswitha was supposed to go to meet her at the end of the Reeperbahn or by the churchyard, but they missed each other even more often than before. 'I could tell you off for not managing to find me, Roswitha, but it doesn't matter. I'm not frightened any more, not even at the churchyard, and in the woods I've never met a soul.'

It was the day before Innstetten's return from Berlin that Effi said that. Roswitha was not much concerned about it, and instead spent her time hanging garlands over the doors; the shark was given a spruce-twig as well and looked even odder than usual. Effi said, 'That's right, Roswitha, he'll be pleased to see all the greenery when he gets back tomorrow. Am I going out today? Dr Hannemann insists I do, he keeps saying I can't be taking it seriously enough or I'd look better. But I don't really feel like it today, it's drizzling and the sky's so grey.'

'I'll bring Madam's raincoat.'

'Yes, do that. But don't come for me, we won't meet anyway,' she said with a laugh. 'Really, you're not very good at finding me, Roswitha, and I don't want you to catch a cold, all for nothing.'

So Roswitha stayed at home, and since Annie was asleep she went to have a chat with Frau Kruse. 'Frau Kruse, my dear,' she said, 'you were going to tell me the story about the Chinaman. Johanna interrupted us yesterday, she always acts so superior, that kind of thing's not for her. But I think there was something to it, I mean between the Chinaman and Thomsen's niece, if it wasn't his granddaughter.'

Frau Kruse nodded.

'Either', Roswitha went on, 'it was a tale of unrequited love' (Frau Kruse nodded again) 'or his love could have been returned and the Chinaman simply couldn't stand the idea that it was all suddenly over. After all, the Chinese are human beings as well, and things will be the same with them as with us.'

'Everything,' Frau Kruse assured her, and was going to tell the story to confirm this when her husband came in and said, 'You could give me the bottle with the leather varnish, Mother; I have to get the harness bright and shiny for when the Master comes back tomorrow; he notices everything, and even if he doesn't say anything you can tell he's noticed.'

'I'll bring it out to you, Kruse,' Roswitha said. 'Your wife's just going to tell me something, but it won't take long and then I'll bring it out.'

A few minutes later Roswitha came out into the yard with the leather varnish and stood beside the harness Kruse had just hung over the garden fence.

'It's not much use now, dammit,' he said, taking the bottle, 'it's drizzling all the time and the shine will go. But my view is that everything has to be done right.'

'Yes it has to. But then, Kruse, it's proper varnish, I can see that, and proper varnish doesn't stay sticky for long, it dries out straight away. Then if it's misty in the morning or there's rain, it won't do any harm. But I have to say, all that about the Chinaman's a strange story.'

Kruse laughed. 'It's a piece of nonsense, Roswitha. And my wife's always telling such stuff instead of doing what needs to be done, and when I have to put on a clean shirt, there's a button missing. And that's the way it's been since we've been here. She's got nothing but those stories inside her head. And the black hen, but the black hen doesn't even lay eggs. And how could it lay eggs? It never gets out, and eggs don't come from just a

cockadoodledoo. You can't expect that of any hen.'

'Now then, Kruse, I'll tell your wife that. I always thought you were a decent man, and now you've come out with something like that about cockadoodledoo. You men are always worse than we think you are. I ought to take that brush there and paint a black moustache on you.'

'Well, from you, Roswitha, I wouldn't say no.' Kruse, who usually stood on his dignity, seemed about to adopt a more and more flirtatious tone, when he suddenly saw his mistress, who that day was coming from the other side of the Plantation and passing by the garden fence at that moment.

'Good afternoon, Roswitha, you seem very cheerful. What's Annie doing?'

'She's asleep, Ma'am.'

But Roswitha blushed as she said that and, quickly breaking off, hurried into the house to help her mistress get changed. Was Johanna there, that was the question. She was often in the 'office' over the road, because there was less to do in the house and Friedrich and Christel were too boring and never had anything to say for themselves.

Annie was still asleep. Effi bent over the cradle, let Roswitha take her hat and raincoat, and sat down on the little sofa in her bedroom. She brushed her damp hair back, put her feet up on the low stool Roswitha had pushed over, and said, visibly enjoying the comfortable rest after a fairly long walk, 'I must point out to you, Roswitha, that Kruse is a married man.'

'I know, Ma'am.'

'Yes, it's surprising all the things we know, and then still behave as if we *didn't*. Nothing can come of it.'

'But nothing's going to come of it, Ma'am …'

'For if you're thinking she's sick, then you're counting your chickens before they're hatched. Sick people live longest. And then she has the black hen. You beware of that, it knows everything and lets everything out. I don't know why, but it gives me the creeps. And I'm willing to bet all that stuff upstairs is to do with that hen.'

'Oh, I don't believe that. But it is terrible all the same. And Kruse, who's always against his wife, can't persuade me otherwise.'

'What did he say?'

'He said it's only mice.'

'Well, mice are bad enough. I can't stand mice. But I could clearly see that you were chatting with him and getting quite familiar. I even think you were going to paint a black moustache on him. That's going quite far in itself. And afterwards you'd be left in the lurch. You're still a nice-looking woman, and you have something about you. But just be careful, that's all I have to say. What was it like the first time with you? Is it something you can tell me?'

'Oh, I can do that. But it was terrible. And because it was so terrible, Madam needn't worry about Kruse. Anyone who's been through something like I did has had enough of it and is careful. Sometimes I still dream about it, and then I feel shattered the next day. Such awful fear …'

Effi had sat up and rested her chin on her hand. 'Well tell me. What can it have been like? As I remember from home, it's always the same old story with you people …'

'Yes, I suppose at first it's always the same, and I don't imagine it was something special with me, not in the least. But the way they went on and on at me about it and I eventually had to say, "Yes, it's true," yes, that was terrible. Mother, well, that was bearable, but Father, he was the village blacksmith, he was strict and quick-tempered and when he heard, he came at me with an iron bar he'd just taken out of the fire. He was going to kill me, and I screamed and ran up to the loft and hid and lay there trembling, and only went down when they called to me and said I should come. And I had a younger sister, and she kept pointing at me and saying, "Shame on you!" And then, when the child was about to come, I went into a barn nearby because I didn't dare have it at home. Some other people found me there, half dead, and carried me to the house and put me in my bed. And on the third day they took the child away, and when later on I asked where it was, they told me it was in good hands. Oh, Madam, may the holy Mother of God preserve you from such misery.'

Effi started and stared at Roswitha. But she was more startled than indignant. 'How can you say that? I'm a married woman, you can't say something like that, it's impertinent, it's out of place.'

'Oh, Ma'am …'

'Tell me instead what became of you. They'd taken the child away from you. That's where you'd got to.'

'Then, after a few days, someone came from Erfurt and asked the burgomaster if there was a wet-nurse in the village. And the burgomaster, may God reward him for it, said yes, and the stranger took me with him right away, and from then on things have been better for me; even with Frau Rohde it was always bearable, and then eventually I came to you, Madam. And that was the best, best of all.' And as she said that, she came over to the sofa and kissed Effi's hand.

'You mustn't keep kissing my hand, Roswitha, I don't like it. And take care with Kruse. In other things you're such a good and sensible woman … With a married man … that's never a good idea.'

'Oh, Madam, God and all the saints guide us most wonderfully, and the misfortune we meet with also has its good side. Anyone who's not improved by it is beyond help … I actually quite like men …'

'You see, Roswitha, you see.'

'But if I had those feelings again—that with Kruse's nothing—and I couldn't resist them, I'd throw myself in

the water right away. It was too terrible. Everything. And what's become of the poor mite? I don't believe it's still alive; they let it die, but I'm the one who's to blame.' She threw herself down by Annie's cot and rocked the child back and forth and kept singing the cradle-song from her own childhood.

'That's enough,' Effi said. 'Stop singing, I've got a headache. Bring me the newspapers. Or has Gieshübler perhaps sent some magazines?'

'He has. And the fashion magazine's on top. We leafed through it, Johanna and I did, before she went across the road. Johanna always gets annoyed that she can't have things like that. Should I bring the fashion magazine?'

'Yes, do that. And bring the lamp as well.'

Roswitha went out, and once she was alone Effi said, 'What we won't do to get by. A pretty lady with a muff and a semi-veil; fashion dolls. But it's the best way of taking my mind off things.'

*

In the course of the next morning a telegram arrived from Innstetten to say that he would be coming by the second train and so wouldn't reach Kessin before evening. Effi couldn't settle all day; fortunately Gieshübler came during the afternoon, which helped her get through one hour. Finally at seven the carriage arrived, and Effi went out to greet him. Innstetten was worked up, in a way that was unusual for him, and didn't notice how Effi's warm welcome was tinged with embarrassment. The lamps and candles were lit in the hall, and the tea things, that Friedrich had already set out on a little table between the cupboards, reflected the profusion of light.

'It looks just the way it did when we arrived here. Do you remember, Effi?' She nodded. 'Only the shark is less fierce today with his spruce-twig, and Rollo too is more restrained and doesn't put his paws on my shoulders any longer. What's up with you, Rollo?'

Rollo brushed past his master and wagged his tail.

'He's not quite happy, either with me or with someone else. Well, I'll assume it's me. At least let's go in.' He went to his room and sat down on the sofa, inviting Effi to sit next to him. 'It was so nice in Berlin, better than I expected, but for all the enjoyment, I kept longing to be back here. And how good you're looking! A little pale and a little changed, but it suits you.'

Effi blushed.

'And now you're blushing into the bargain. But what I say is true. There was something of the spoilt child about you, but all at once you look like a woman.'

'That's nice to hear, Geert, but I think you're just saying it.'

'No, no, you can take the credit for it yourself, if it's something good …'

'I'd have thought it was.'

'And now guess whom I bring greetings from.'

'That's not difficult, Geert. Moreover, we women, among whom I can now count myself since you've got back' (and she held out her hand to him and laughed), 'we women are good at guessing. We're not so slow on the uptake as you men.'

'Well then, who from?'

'Well, from Cousin Briest, of course. He's the only person I know in Berlin, apart from my aunts, whom you won't have gone to see and who are far too jealous to send me their greetings. Have you not found that all old aunts are jealous?'

'Yes, that's true, Effi. And when you talk like that you're my old Effi again. You should know that the old Effi, the one that still looked like a child, was very much to my taste as well. Just as much as the Frau Baronin I see before me now.'

'Is that so? And if you should have to choose between the two …'

'That's a tricky question, I'm not going to even try to answer it. But here's Friedrich with the tea. How I've looked forward to this moment! And I even said as much to your cousin Briest, when we were drinking your health in champagne at Dressel's[*] … Your ears must have been burning … And do you know what your cousin said?'

'Something silly, I'm sure. He's very good at that.'

'That's the most ungrateful thing I've ever heard. "To Effi," he said, "my beautiful cousin … Do you know, Innstetten, most of all I'd like to challenge you and shoot you dead. For Effi's an angel, and you've deprived me of that angel." And when he said that, he looked so serious and melancholy you could almost believe he meant it.'

'Oh, I've seen him in that mood too. How many glasses had you had?'

'I can't recall at the moment—perhaps I couldn't even have said at the time. But I do believe he was quite serious about it. And perhaps that might even have been the right thing. Don't you think you could have lived with him?'

'Lived with him? That's not much, Geert. But I almost feel like saying that I couldn't even have lived with him.'

‘Why not? He really is a nice, charming person, and he’s also quite intelligent.’

‘Yes, he is that …’

‘But …’

‘But he’s silly. And that’s not a characteristic we women like, not even when we’re still half children, which is what you’ve always seen me as, perhaps even still do, despite my progress. Silliness is not for us women. Men have to be men.’

‘A good thing you said that. Damn it all, I’ll really have to pull myself together. And I’m in the happy position of being able to tell you that I’ve just come, more or less directly, from something that looks like pulling myself together, or at least means I’ll have to pull myself together in future … Tell me, what does a ministry mean to you?’

‘A ministry? Well, it can be two things. It can be people, clever, distinguished people who run the country, and it can be just a house, a palazzo, a Palazzo Strozzi or Pitti* or, if they’re not right, some other one. As you can see, my trip to Italy wasn’t in vain.’

‘And would you be agreeable to living in such a palazzo? I mean, in a ministry like that?’

‘Good Lord, Geert, they haven’t made you a minister, have they? Gieshübler was saying something like that. And the Prince can do everything. My God, so he’s put it through, and I’m still only eighteen.’

Innstetten laughed. ‘No, Effi, not a minister, we’re not that far yet. But perhaps I’ll develop all sorts of talents and then it won’t be impossible.’

‘So not at the moment, not yet a minister?’

‘No. And, to tell the truth, we won’t even be living in a ministry, but I’ll be going to the ministry every day, just as I go to our Landrat’s office, and I’ll report to the minister and travel with him when he goes on an inspection of the offices in the provinces. And you’ll be a Frau Ministerialrat and live in Berlin, and in six months time you’ll hardly remember that you were here in Kessin and had nothing but Gieshübler and the dunes and the Plantation.’

Effi didn’t say a word, but her eyes opened wider and wider; there was a nervous tic at the corners of her mouth and her whole delicate body started to tremble. All at once she slid down off the seat beside Innstetten, put her arms round his knees, and said, as if she were praying, ‘Thank God.’

Innstetten went pale. What was it? Some feeling that had gripped him, briefly, but again and again over the past few weeks, had returned and was so clear to see in his look that Effi drew back in alarm. She had allowed herself to be carried away by a happy feeling that was as good as an admission of her guilt, and had said more than she ought to have. She had to find something to make it plausible, she had to find a way out of this situation, whatever the cost.

‘Get up, Effi. What’s wrong?’

Effi stood up quickly. However, she didn’t go back to sit on the sofa but pulled over a high-backed chair, evidently because she didn’t feel she had the strength to sit up without support.

‘What’s wrong?’ Innstetten said again. ‘I thought you’d had happy times here, and now you’re saying “Thank God,” as if everything here had given you the horrors. Was I a horror for you? Or was it something else? Tell me.’

‘You still don’t know, Geert?’ she said, making a great effort to control the trembling in her voice. ‘Happy times! Yes, of course, some happy times, but others as well. I’ve never quite got over my fear here, never. There was never a fortnight when I hadn’t sensed it looking over my shoulder, that same face, that same pale complexion. And it was back again during the nights when you were away just now, not the face, but the shuffling again, and Rollo barked again, and Roswitha, who’d heard it too, came to my bedside and sat by me and we only got back to sleep as dawn was breaking. It’s a haunted house, and I was meant to believe it, all that about the haunting—for you’re an educator. Yes, Geert, that’s what you are. But be that as it may, this much I do know: I’ve been afraid in this house for a whole year and more, and if I can get away from here I think it will leave me and I’ll feel free again.’

Innstetten hadn’t taken his eyes off her and followed every word. What could it mean, ‘you’re an educator’? And the other thing that came before it: ‘I was meant to believe it, all that about the haunting.’ What was all that? Where did it come from? And he felt his faint suspicion return and establish itself more firmly. But he was old enough to know that all signs were deceptive, and in our jealousy, Argus-eyed though it is, we more often go astray than in our blind trust. It could be the way she said it was. And if that were so, why should she not cry out: ‘Thank God!’

And thus, quickly going through all the possibilities, he controlled his suspicion and held out his hand to her across the table. ‘Forgive me, Effi, but I was so surprised at all that. My own fault, of course. I’ve always been too preoccupied with my own affairs. We men are all egoists. There’s certainly one good thing about Berlin: there aren’t any haunted houses there. Where would they come from? And now let’s go across so I can see Annie; otherwise Roswitha will be calling me an uncaring father.’

As he spoke Effi had gradually calmed down, and the feeling of having saved herself from a danger she herself had created allowed her to stand up straight once more.

Chapter 22

The next morning the two of them had a somewhat belated breakfast together. Innstetten had overcome his ill-humour and worse, and Effi was so full of the feeling of liberation that she was once more not only able to display a slightly forced good mood but had almost recovered her former uninhibited temperament. She was still in Kessin, but already she felt as if it lay far behind her.

'I've been thinking, Effi,' Innstetten said. 'You're not entirely wrong in what you said about our house here. It was good enough for Captain Thomsen but not for a young, pampered woman; everything old-fashioned and no room. We'll see that you have a better place in Berlin, with a grand drawing-room as well, and high, stained-glass windows in the hall and on the stairs, the Kaiser with his crown and sceptre, or even something religious, St Elizabeth or the Virgin Mary. Let's say the Virgin Mary, we owe that to Roswitha.'

Effi laughed. 'Yes, that's what we must have. But who's going to find an apartment for us? I can't send Cousin Briest out looking for one. Even less the aunts! They'll think anything's good enough.'

'Yes, finding an apartment. No one can do that for you. I think you'll have to go there yourself.'

'When do you have in mind?'

'The middle of March.'

'Oh, that's much too late, Geert, everything will be gone by then. The best apartments are hardly likely to wait around for us.'

'That's true. But I only got back yesterday and I can't say "go tomorrow". That wouldn't look very good and wouldn't suit me either; I'm just glad to be back home with you again.'

'No,' she said, rather noisily rearranging the coffee things in order to conceal a rising feeling of embarrassment, 'no, it's not to be like that, not today and not tomorrow, but in the next few days. And if I do find something, I'll be back soon. And one more thing, Roswitha and Annie must come too. Best of all would be you as well. But I can see that's not possible. And I don't think the separation will last long. I already know where I'm going to look for something to rent …'

'Which is?'

'That's my secret. I want to have a secret too. So that I can give you a nice surprise.'

At that moment Friedrich came in to hand over the post, most of it consisting of official correspondence for Innstetten and newspapers. 'Oh, there's a letter for you as well,' Innstetten said. 'If I'm not mistaken, that's your Mama's handwriting.'

Effi took the letter. 'Yes, from Mama. But that's not the Friesack postmark; look, it clearly says Berlin.'

'Indeed,' Innstetten said with a laugh. 'You sound as if it's impossible. Your Mama will be in Berlin and has written her darling a letter from her hotel.'

'Yes,' Effi said, 'that will be it. But it still makes me almost afraid to open it, and what Hulda Niemeyer always used to say, "It's better to be afraid than to hope," is no comfort at all. What do you think about that?'

'Not quite what I'd expect from a pastor's daughter. But read the letter. Here's the paper-knife.'

Effi opened the envelope and read the letter out:

'My Dear Effi,

I've been here in Berlin for twenty-four hours now; an appointment with Dr Schweigger. As soon as he saw me he congratulated me, and when, surprised, I asked him why, he said Wüllersdorf had just been to see him and told him that Innstetten had been appointed to the ministry where he's head of department. I was slightly annoyed to have to hear this from a third party, but my pride and delight outweighed my annoyance and so the pair of you are forgiven. I always knew (even when I was still with the hussars in Rathenow) that he would make his mark in life, and now *you're* the one to benefit from it. You must find an apartment, of course, and have new furnishings. If you think you could use my advice, my dear Effi, then come as quickly as your time allows. I'm staying here a week for treatment, perhaps a little longer if it's not effective; Schweigger's been very vague about it. I have a room in a pension in Schadowstrasse; there are rooms free near mine. I'll tell you about my eye when you get here, at the moment all I'm concerned about is your future. Briest will be immensely happy, he always acts as if he couldn't care less about these things, though actually they mean more to him than to me. Best wishes to Innstetten and kiss Annie for me.

As ever, with all my love,
Luise von B.'

Effi put the letter down and said nothing. She had decided what she had to do, but she didn't want to say it herself. She wanted Innstetten to suggest it, then she would hesitantly agree.

And Innstetten did indeed fall into the trap. 'Well, Effi, you're sitting there so calm.'

'Oh, Geert, there are two sides to everything. On the one hand it would be lovely to see Mama again, perhaps even in a few days' time. But there are so many reasons against it.'

'For example?'

'Mama, as you well know, has very definite views and insists on getting her own way. She could get Papa to

agree to anything. But I'd like to have an apartment that is to *my* taste, and new furnishings that I like.'

Innstetten laughed. 'Is that all?'

'It would be enough, but it's not all.' Summoning up all her strength, she looked at him and said, 'And then, Geert, I don't want to leave you the moment you've come back.'

'You little rascal, you're just saying that because you know my soft spot. But we're all vain and I'm happy to believe you. I'm happy to believe you and will make a heroic effort to renounce your company. Go as soon as you think necessary and your heart will allow.'

'You mustn't say that, Geert. You're more or less obliging me to put on a show of affection, and I have to say, out of pure coquetry, "Oh, Geert, in that case I'll never go." Or something like that.'

Innstetten wagged his finger at her. 'You're too subtle for me, Effi. There was me thinking you were a child, and now I see you're up to all the rest of them. But no more of that or, as your Papa's always saying, "That's too big a question." Tell me instead when you want to go.'

'Today's Tuesday. Let's say on Friday. By the midday boat, then I'll be in Berlin by the evening.'

'Agreed. And when will you be back?'

'Well, let's say Monday evening. That gives me three days.'

'No, that's too soon. You can't do it in three days. And your Mama won't let you go so quickly.'

'So for as long as necessary, then.'

'Yes.'

And with that Innstetten got up to go over to his office.

*

The days until she went simply flew past. Roswitha was very happy. 'Oh, Madam, Kessin, well yes … but it's not Berlin. And the horse-drawn trams. And the way they ring and you don't know whether to go to the right or the left, and sometimes I've felt as if everything was going right over me. No, there's nothing like that here. I think there are some days when we don't even see six people. Just the dunes and the sea beyond them. There's the noise of the waves all the time, but that's all.'

'You're right, Roswitha. There's the noise all the time, but it's not a proper life. And you get all kinds of silly ideas. You have to agree that the business with Kruse wasn't right.'

'Oh, Ma'am …'

'No, I don't want to go into that any more. You'll only deny it anyway. And don't take too few things with you. Actually, you can take all your things, and Annie's as well.'

'I thought we'd be coming back.'

'Yes, I will. The master wants me to. But you and Annie might be able to stay there, with my mother. You'll just have to see that she doesn't spoil little Annie too much. She was sometimes strict with me, but with a grandchild …'

'And then Annie's such a little darling, you can't help loving her.'

That was on the Thursday, the day before their departure. Innstetten was travelling out into the country and wasn't expected back until the evening. In the afternoon Effi walked into the town, as far as the market square, where she went to the pharmacy and asked for a bottle of sal volatile. 'You never know who'll be on the train with you,' she said to the old assistant, with whom she often had a little chat and who idolized her as much as Gieshübler himself.

'Is Dr Gieshübler in?' she asked, after she'd put the bottle in her bag.

'Of course, Madam. He's in his room there, reading the papers.'

'I won't be disturbing him, will I?'

'Oh, not at all.'

So Effi went in. It was a small room with a high ceiling and shelves all round with all sorts of flasks and retorts on them; just along the one wall there were boxes, with iron rings on them and alphabetically arranged, in which he kept the prescriptions.

Gieshübler was delighted and embarrassed. 'What an honour. Here among my retorts. May I beg you to take a seat for a moment, Frau Baronin?'

'Of course, my dear Gieshübler. But it really is only just for a moment. I've come to say goodbye.'

'But surely you're coming back, Frau Baronin. Just for three or four days, I heard …'

'Well, yes, my dear friend, I'm supposed to be coming back; in fact it's even been agreed that I'll be back in Kessin in a week at the latest. But it's possible I might *not* come back. Do I have to tell you how many things might happen … ? I can see that you're going to tell me I'm too young … young people can die as well. And there are so many other things too. So I'd rather say goodbye to you as if it were for good.'

'But my dear Frau Baronin …'

'As if it were for good. And I want to thank you, dear Gieshübler. You are the best thing there was here; because you are the best, of course. Even if I live to be a hundred, I'll never forget you. There were times when I felt lonely here, and sometimes I was heavy-hearted, more than you can imagine; I didn't always get things right; but, from the very first day, whenever I saw you I always felt happier and better, too.'

‘But my dear Frau Baronin …’

‘And for that I want to thank you. I’ve just bought a phial of sal volatile; on the train there are often strange people who won’t even let you open the window; and if it should perhaps happen—it really goes to your head, I mean the smelling-salts—that the tears come to my eyes, then I’ll think of you. Farewell, my dear friend, and send my greetings to your friend, Fräulein Trippelli. I’ve been thinking of her several times during the last few weeks, and of Prince Kotchukoff. It still seems a strange relationship, but I can understand it … And keep in touch. Or I’ll write to you.’

With that Effi left. Gieshübler accompanied her out into the square. He was dazed, so much so that he didn’t take in some of the mysterious things she had said.

*

Effi went back home. ‘Bring me the lamp, Johanna,’ she said, ‘but to my bedroom. And then some tea. I feel so cold and can’t wait until the master’s back.’

Both were brought. Effi was already sitting at her little writing-desk, a sheet of paper in front of her, the pen in her hand.

‘The tea on the table there, please, Johanna.’

Once Johanna had left the room, Effi locked the door, looked in the mirror for a moment, then sat down. And wrote:

‘I am leaving on the boat in the morning and this is my letter of farewell. Innstetten expects me to return in a few days but I am not coming back … You will know why … It would have been best if I’d never seen this place at all. I beg you not to take this as a reproach, the guilt is all mine. If I look at your house … your actions may be excusable, not mine. I am heavily burdened with guilt but perhaps I can overcome it. That we have been called away from here I see as a sign that I may still find forgiveness. Forget what has happened, forget me.

Your Effi.’

She glanced again through what she had written. What struck her as strangest of all was the use of the formal *Sie*; but that had to be; it was to say that there was no way back. And she slipped the letter into an envelope and went to a house between the churchyard and the corner of the woods. A thin trail of smoke came from the ramshackle chimney. There she handed the letter in.

When she returned Innstetten was already home, and she sat with him and told him about Gieshübler and the sal volatile.

Innstetten laughed. ‘Wherever did you get your Latin, Effi?’

*

The boat, a light sailing-boat (the steamboats only ran in the summer), left at twelve. Effi and Innstetten were already on board a quarter of an hour before that; Roswitha and Annie as well.

There was more luggage than seemed necessary for a trip that was only intended to last a few days. Innstetten was talking to the captain; Effi, in a raincoat and a light grey hat, stood on the afterdeck, close to the wheel, surveying the Embankment and the row of pretty houses along it. Directly opposite the jetty was Hoppensack’s Hotel, a three-storey building with a yellow flag with a crown and cross on it, hanging down slackly from the roof in the still, somewhat misty air. Effi looked up at the flag for a while but then her gaze slid back down, finally coming to rest on a group of people standing around, full of curiosity, on the Embankment. At that moment the bell sounded. Effi had a very strange feeling; the boat started to move slowly, and when she surveyed the jetty again she saw that Crampas was in the front row. Seeing him gave her a start, but she was also pleased. Crampas though, his demeanour completely changed, was visibly moved, and raised his hand in a grave farewell, to which she responded, but with a very friendly wave accompanied by a look that had something pleading about it. Then she quickly went down to the cabin, where Roswitha had already settled with Annie. She stayed in the rather stuffy room until they had left the river and emerged into the broad estuary of the Breitling. Then Innstetten came and called her to come on deck to enjoy the splendid view. She did go up. Grey clouds were hanging over the surface of the water, with, just now and then, a half-veiled sun peeping through. Effi thought back to the day, exactly fifteen months ago now, on which she had driven in an open carriage along the bank of the Breitling. Such a short period of time, and her life often so quiet and lonely. And yet how much had happened since then!

Then they sailed up the waterway and were at the station, or at least quite close to it, by two. When they then passed the Prince Bismarck Inn, Golchowski was standing in the doorway again and insisted on accompanying the Herr Landrat and his wife as far as the steps up the embankment. The train not yet having been announced when they reached the platform, Effi and Innstetten walked up and down.

They talked about the question of their apartment; they were in agreement about the district, namely that it had to be between the area by the Tiergarten Park and the Zoo. ‘I want to hear the finches singing and the parrots as well,’ Innstetten said, and Effi agreed.

Now they heard the signal and the train arrived. The station-master was very obliging and Effi had a compartment to herself.

One last handshake, a wave of the handkerchief, and the train set off again.

Chapter 23

Friedrichstrasse Station was crowded, but despite that Effi spotted her Mama, with Cousin Dagobert beside her, from the window of her compartment. Great was their joy at seeing each other again, the wait in the luggage-hall didn't make too great a demand on their patience, and in less than five minutes the cab was driving along Dorotheenstrasse, beside the track of the horse-drawn tram, towards Schadowstrasse,* on the first corner of which the pension was. Roswitha was delighted, and enjoyed the way Annie stretched out her little hands to the lights.

Now they were there, and Effi was given her two rooms. They were not, as expected, next to Frau von Briest's, but still in the same corridor, and once everything was in place and Annie settled in a cot, Effi went back to her mother's room, a little parlour with a fireplace in which a fire was burning—a small fire, because the weather was mild, almost warm. Places for three had been set at the round table with the green-shaded lamp, and the tea things were on a little side-table.

'You've got a delightful room, Mama,' Effi said as she sat down opposite the sofa, only to get up immediately to busy herself with the tea. 'May I play the tea-lady again, Mama?'

'Of course, Effi dear. But only for Dagobert and yourself. I'm afraid I have to refrain, which I find almost too hard to bear.'

'I understand, because of your eyes. But tell me now, Mama, what's the situation with them? In the cab, clattering away as it was, we only talked about Innstetten and our great career, much too much, and it can't go on like that. Believe me, your eyes are more important to me, and in one respect I can see that they are quite unchanged, thank God, and still give me the same friendly look as always.' And she rushed over to her Mama and kissed her hand.

'You're so impetuous. Still the same old Effi.'

'Oh no, Mama. Not the same old Effi. I only wish I were. You change once you're married.'

Her cousin laughed. 'I can't see much of that, Cousin; you're even prettier, that's all. And I suspect the impetuosity's not gone either.'

'There speaks the cousin,' her Mama said, but Effi would have none of it and said, 'Dagobert, you're everything—apart from a judge of character. It's strange. You officers are never good judges of character, certainly not you young ones. You only have eyes for yourselves and your recruits, and those in the cavalry have their horses as well. They know absolutely nothing at all.'

'Whence all this wisdom, Cousin? You don't know any officers. Kessin, I read, has declined the hussars intended for it, a case unique in the annals of the world, by the way. Or are you harking back to the old days? You were still half a child when the hussars from Rathenow went over to Hohen-Cremmen.'

'To that I could say that children are the best observers, but I won't. That's all just idle chat. I want to know how Mama's eyes are.'

Frau von Briest told them that the eye specialist had said it was blood pressure on the brain. That caused the flickering. It had to be dealt with by dieting—beer, coffee, tea, all off the menu—and an occasional removal of some blood, then it would soon improve. 'He was talking about a fortnight. But I know doctors' estimates; a fortnight means six weeks, and I'll still be here when Innstetten comes and you move into your new apartment. I won't deny that that's the best thing about the whole business and reconciles me to the long treatment. Just find something really nice. I thought of Landgrafenstrasse or Keithstrasse, elegant and not over-expensive. For you'll have to tighten your belts. Innstetten's position is a great honour, but it won't bring in much. And Briest's complaining as well. Prices are dropping, and he tells me every day that if they don't introduce protective duties he'll be reduced to beggary and have to give up Hohen-Cremmen. You know how he likes to exaggerate. But now help yourself, Dagobert, and tell us something amusing, if you can. Reports on illnesses are always boring, and your nearest and dearest only listen because they have to. I'm sure Effi would like to hear something, perhaps a story from *Die Fliegenden Blätter* or *Kladderadatsch*,* though that's said not to be very good any more.'

'Oh, it's just as good as it used to be. They've still got Strudelwitz and Prudelwitz, and stories about them write themselves.'

'My favourites are Karlchen Miessnick and Wippchen von Bernau.'*

'Yes, they're the best. Though forgive me for saying so, my fair cousin, but Wippchen isn't from *Kladderadatsch* and he hasn't anything to do at the moment, since there are no wars for him to write his comic reports on. We'd like to have our turn and finally get rid of this terrible emptiness.' As he said that, he drew his fingers across his chest from the buttonhole to his arm.

'Oh, that's all mere vanity. Tell me something interesting instead. What's in vogue?'

'Well, it's strange, Cousin. It's not to everyone's taste. At the moment we have Bible jokes.'

'Bible jokes? What can they be? … The Bible and jokes don't go together.'

'That's what I said, they're not to everyone's taste. But acceptable or not, they're very popular. It's just a

fashion, like plover's eggs.'

'Well, if it's not too outrageous, give us an example. Can you?'

'Of course I can. It starts with a question—all these jokes start in that way, this one with a very simple question: Who was the first house-guest? Come on, can you work it out?'

'The first house-guest? I've no idea. Who was it?'

'The first house-guest was sorrow. It says in the Book of Job,* "No longer shalt thou be visited by sorrow".'

Effi repeated the sentence, shaking her head. She was very much one of those fortunate people who have no appreciation of that kind of play on words, and her cousin got into more and more of a tangle as he tried to explain the joke.

'Oh, I see. I'm sorry, Dagobert, but I think that really is *too* stupid.'

'Yes, it is stupid,' Dagobert said, abashed.

'Stupid and unseemly; it's enough to spoil Berlin for me. I put Kessin behind me to have a social life again, and the first thing I hear is a Bible joke. Mama's kept silent too, and that says enough. But I'll help you get out of this awkward predicament …'

'Please do, Cousin …'

'… get you out of this awkward predicament by taking it seriously as a good omen that the first thing said to me here by my cousin Dagobert was, "No longer shalt thou be visited by sorrow." It's odd, my cousin, but however weak it is as a joke, I'm still grateful for it.'

Hardly was he out of the noose of his own making than Dagobert was trying to poke fun at Effi's earnest tone, but gave up as soon as he saw that she wasn't amused by it.

He left soon after ten, promising to come the next day to see how they were.

As soon as he had gone, Effi also withdrew to her room.

*

The next day the weather was fine, and mother and daughter set out early. They first went to the eye clinic, where Effi stayed in the waiting-room and leafed through a magazine, then headed for the Tiergarten area, as far as the zoo, to see if they could find an apartment. And they did actually find something suitable in Keithstrasse, which was what they had been hoping for from the very first; the only problem was that it was a new building, not yet finished, and damp. 'It's not possible, Effi,' Frau von Briest said. 'It's out of the question for reasons of health. And then, a Geheimrat isn't the kind of person who takes a cheap tenancy while the apartment dries out.'

Even though she liked the apartment very much, Effi was more than happy to accept these considerations because she wasn't bothered about settling the matter quickly, on the contrary, 'more time, more choice', and putting off a decision was what suited her best. 'But we'll still keep an eye on that apartment, Mama, it's in such a lovely situation and is basically what I had in mind.' Then the two of them drove back to the city centre, dined in a restaurant that had been recommended to them, and went to the opera in the evening, to which the doctor had given his consent on condition that Frau von Briest went to hear more than to see.

The next few days were passed in a similar way; they were genuinely happy to be together again and to enjoy a good long chat with each other. More than once Effi, who, when she felt well, was not only a good raconteur and listener but also had a ready tongue when it came to scandal-mongering, was her old high-spirited self, and her Mama wrote home saying how happy she was to see the 'child' so cheerful and full of laughter again; it took them back to the days almost two years ago when they had bought her trousseau. Cousin Briest was the same as ever too. And that was indeed the case, though with the one difference: his appearances were less frequent, and when asked why he replied, apparently seriously, 'You're too dangerous for me, Cousin.' At that mother and daughter burst out laughing, and Effi said, 'You're still quite young, of course, Dagobert, but no longer young enough for that kind of flirtation.'

Almost a fortnight passed in this way. Innstetten's letters were more and more pressing and becoming rather caustic, almost towards his mother-in-law as well, so that Effi saw it wasn't possible to put off a decision any longer and she really had to take an apartment. But what about after that? There were still three weeks to go before the move to Berlin, and Innstetten was insisting she return soon. There was only one way out: she must put on an act again and pretend to be ill.

She didn't find that easy, and for more than one reason. But it had to be, and once she had decided that, she had also decided how the role was to be played, right down to the very last detail.

'Mama, as you can see, Innstetten's getting rather touchy about my continued absence. I think we'll have to give in and take an apartment today. Then I'll go home tomorrow. But, oh, it will be so hard for me to leave you.'

Frau von Briest agreed. 'And which apartment will you choose?'

'The first one, the one in Keithstrasse, of course. I liked it so well, right from the start, and so did you. It won't be entirely dried out yet, but it is the summer, which is a help. And if the damp is too bad and I get a bit of rheumatism, I've always got Hohen-Cremmen.'

'Don't tempt fate, child; sometimes you can get a touch of rheumatism and you've no idea why.'

These words suited Effi very well. She took the apartment that morning and wrote a card to Innstetten, telling him she'd be returning the next day. The cases were then immediately packed and all preparations made.

But the next morning Effi called her Mama to her bedside and said, 'I can't go, Mama. I've got such aches and pains, I feel sore right across my back. I almost think it must be rheumatism. I'd never have thought it was so painful.'

'You see? Now what did I tell you? You shouldn't tempt fate. Yesterday you were dismissive about it and today here it is. When I see Schweigger, I'll ask him what you should do.'

'No, not Schweigger. He's a specialist, and it's not on to consult him on something else, he might even take it amiss. I think the best thing is just to wait and see. It might pass. I'll live on tea and soda-water for the whole day, and if that makes me sweat, I may get over it.'

Frau von Briest agreed to that course of action, but insisted she must feed herself properly. To starve oneself, as used to be the fashion, she said, was quite wrong and simply weakened one; in that respect she was completely on the side of the new school: take in plenty of food.

All this was of no little comfort to Effi. She sent a telegram to Innstetten in which she spoke of the tiresome occurrence, causing an annoying, though only temporary, delay to her return; then she said to Roswitha, 'You'll have to fetch me some books now, Roswitha; it won't be difficult, I want some old ones, very old ones.'

'Of course, Madam. The lending-library's only just round the corner. What should I get?'

'I'll write them down, a selection, sometimes they haven't got the one you happen to want.' Roswitha brought pencil and paper and Effi wrote down: Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe* or *Quentin Durward*; Fenimore Cooper, *The Spy*; Dickens, *David Copperfield*; Willibald Alexis, *Herr von Bredow's Trousers*.*

Roswitha read through the list and cut off the last line in the other room; she would find it embarrassing, both for herself and for her mistress, to hand over the note in its original form.

The day passed without anything special happening. The next morning she was no better, nor on the third day.

'This can't go on, Effi. If something like that gets established, it's difficult to get rid of it again. It's these protracted illnesses doctors warn you about most strongly, and rightly so.'

Effi sighed. 'Yes, Mama, but whom should we consult? Not a young doctor; I don't know why, but I'd feel embarrassed.'

'A young doctor's always embarrassing, and it's all the worse if he isn't. But you can be reassured; I'll bring a very old one who treated me when I was still a boarder at Hecker's school, that was some twenty years ago. At that time he was close on fifty and had lovely grey hair, very curly. He was a ladies' man, but kept it within limits. Doctors who forget that never succeed, and quite right too; our women, at least society women, still have a sound core.'

'You think so? I'm always happy when I hear something good like that. For now and then you hear something different. And it must often be difficult. So what is the name of this Geheimrat? I assume your doctor has that title.'

'Geheimrat Rummschüttel.'

Effi laughed out loud. 'Rummschüttel—Dr Shake-it-all-about! And that a doctor for someone who can't move.'

'You do say some strange things, Effi. You can't be in all that great pain.'

'No, not at the moment. It's changing all the time.'

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Geheimrat Rummschüttel appeared next morning. Frau von Briest welcomed him, and when he saw Effi, his first words were, 'Just like your Mama!'

Her mother tried to reject the comparison, saying that twenty years and more were a long time, but Rummschüttel stuck to his opinion, assuring them that while not every face imprinted itself on his mind, once the impression was there it stayed for good. 'And now, my dear Frau von Innstetten, what's the problem, how can we help you?'

'Oh, Herr Geheimrat, I find it difficult to tell you what it is. It's constantly changing. Just at the moment it seems to have disappeared. At first I was thinking of rheumatism, but I could almost believe it's neuralgia, pains down my back, and then I can't sit up. My Papa suffers from neuralgia, so I could observe what it's like when I still lived at home. Perhaps it's hereditary.'

'Very probably,' Rummschüttel said, after having felt her pulse and given his patient a brief but sharp scrutiny. 'Very probably, Frau Baronin.' However, what he was thinking to himself was, 'Acting sick to get off school, a virtuoso performance. A coquette *comme il faut*.' He didn't allow any of this to be seen, instead he said, as earnestly as any patient could desire, 'Rest and warmth is the best I can advise. Some medicine, nothing nasty, will do the rest.'

And he stood up to write the prescription: oil of bitter almonds, half an ounce; oil of neroli, two ounces. 'I would ask you to take half a teaspoon of this every two hours, my dear Frau Baronin. It will calm your nerves. And one more thing I must insist on: no mental exertion, no visits, no reading.' As he said that, he pointed to the book beside her.

‘It’s Scott.’

‘Oh, there’s no objection to that. Best of all is travel-writing. I’ll call round again tomorrow.’

Effi had kept to her role wonderfully well, but despite that, once she was alone—her Mama was seeing the doctor out—she felt herself go bright red; she had very clearly seen that he had responded to her play-acting with some play-acting of his own. He was clearly a gentleman with great experience of life, who could see everything clearly, but didn’t want to see everything, perhaps because he knew that such things sometimes had to be respected. But if there were pretences that shouldn’t be respected, was not the one she was acting out of that kind?

Soon afterwards her Mama came back, and mother and daughter were full of praise for the refined old man who, despite the fact that he was nearly seventy, had something youthful about him. ‘Send Roswitha out to the pharmacy right away … but you’re only to take a dose every three hours, he said to me outside. That’s the way he was when I knew him before, he didn’t often prescribe medicines and never a lot; but it was always invigorating and helped straight away.’

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Rummschüttel came two days later, then just every third day, because he could see how embarrassed the young woman was at his visits. This endeared her to him, and after this third visit he had come to a firm opinion: ‘There’s something here compelling this woman to behave as she is doing.’ He had long since stopped feeling irritated by such things.

At his fourth visit Rummschüttel found that Effi was up, sitting in a rocking-chair, a book in her hand and Annie beside her.

‘Ah, my dear Frau Baronin. I’m delighted. I don’t ascribe it to my medicine; this fine weather, these bright March days, illness just melts away. My congratulations. And your Frau Mama?’

‘She’s gone out, Herr Geheimrat, to Keithstrasse where we’ve rented an apartment. My husband will be here in a few days’ time, and I very much hope to be able to introduce you to him once the apartment’s in order. For I assume I can look forward to you taking care of me in future.’

He bowed.

‘Our new apartment’, she went on, ‘has just been built, and I’m worried about it. Do you think, Herr Geheimrat, that the damp walls …’

‘Not in the least, my dear Frau Baronin. Heat the place thoroughly for three or four days, keeping the doors and windows open, and you can risk it, I assure you. And as far as your neuralgia was concerned, it wasn’t anything to be very concerned about, but I’m delighted your caution gave me the opportunity to renew an old acquaintance and make a new one.’ He repeated his bow, gave Annie a friendly look, and left, giving his regards to her mother.

Hardly had he gone than Effi was at her desk writing a letter.

‘Dear Innstetten,

Rummschüttel was here just now and has pronounced me recovered. I am now well enough to travel, tomorrow for example; but it’s the 24th already and you’re coming here on the 28th. And, anyway, I’m still suffering from the after-effects. I assume you’ll understand if I give up the whole idea of making the journey. Our things are already on the way, and if I came we’d have to stay in Hoppensack’s Hotel, like visitors. We must think about the cost as well, our expenses are going to pile up; amongst other things we’ll have Rummschüttel’s retainer to consider, if he’s to remain our doctor. He’s a delightful old gentleman. In medical matters he’s not quite considered top-drawer, a “ladies’ doctor” his jealous colleagues say. But that expression also contains praise, not everyone knows how to deal with us. The fact that I can’t say farewell to the Kessiners personally doesn’t really matter. I went to see Gieshübler. Frau Crampas always remained distant from me, distant to the point of rudeness; that only leaves the Pastor and Dr Hannemann and Crampas. Give my best wishes to the latter. I will be sending cards to the families out in the country; the Güldenklees, you tell me, are in Italy (I can’t imagine what they’re doing there), so that just leaves the three others. Make my excuses for me as best you can. You’re the man who knows the proprieties, how to find the right word. I’ll perhaps write a note to Frau von Padden—I really thought her delightful on New Year’s Eve—expressing my regret. Send me a telegram to say whether you’re in agreement with all that.

As ever,
your Effi.’

Effi posted the letter herself, as if by that she could make the answer arrive sooner, and the next morning the telegram she had requested from Innstetten arrived: ‘In agreement with everything.’ Her heart leapt with joy, and she hurried down the stairs to the nearest cab-rank. ‘Keithstrasse 1c.’ And the cab flew down Unter den Linden, then along Tiergartenstrasse, and stopped outside their new apartment.

Upstairs the things that had arrived the previous day were still lying around higgledy-piggledy, but that didn’t bother her, and when she stepped out on to the wide balcony the Tiergarten Park lay there before her, on the other side of the canal bridge, all its trees already showing a shimmer of green. Above it the sun was shining brightly in a clear blue sky.

She quivered with excitement and took a deep breath. Then she stepped back into the room from the balcony, put her hands together, and looked up.

‘And now, with God’s aid, a new life. Things are going to be different.’

Chapter 24

Three days later Innstetten arrived in Berlin, fairly late, around nine. They were all at the station: Effi, her Mama, her cousin. He was warmly received, warmest of all by Effi, and a whole host of matters had already been discussed by the time the carriage stopped outside their new apartment in Keithstrasse. ‘Oh, you’ve made a good choice, Effi,’ Innstetten said as he went into the vestibule, ‘no shark, no crocodile and, I hope, no ghost.’

‘No, Geert, that’s all over now. A new dawn is breaking and I’m not going to be afraid any longer, and I’m going to be better than before and live more according to your wishes.’ She whispered all this to him as they made their way up the carpeted stairs to the second floor. Dagobert had given his arm to her mother.

Some things were still lacking upstairs, but they had made sure the apartment had a homely look and Innstetten said how pleased he was with it: ‘You’re a little genius, Effi.’ But she rejected his praise and pointed to her Mama. She was the one who merited it, Effi said. She had been adamant with her ‘This is where it has to go,’ and had always been right, which had saved a lot of time, of course, and kept them all in a good mood. Finally Roswitha came to greet the master, adding ‘Fräulein Annie begs to be excused for today’—a little joke of which she was proud and with which she made her point perfectly.

Now they sat down at the beautifully set table, and after Innstetten had poured himself a glass of wine and clinked glasses with everyone, ‘to happy days’, he took Effi’s hand and said, ‘But now tell me, Effi, what was all that about your illness?’

‘Oh, let’s forget that, it’s not worth mentioning; a little painful and a real nuisance, because it frustrated our plans. But it wasn’t more than that and now it’s over and done with. Rummschüttel did his job; he’s a delightful, refined old gentleman, as I think I told you in my letter. He’s not supposed to be a leading light in medical science, but Mama says that’s an advantage. And she’ll be right about that, as she always is. Doctor Hannemann was just the same, but he could always put his finger on the problem. Now tell me, what are Gieshübler and all the others doing?’

‘Who are all these others? Crampas sends his greetings to the Frau Baronin …’

‘Oh, very courteous of him.’

‘And the Pastor wants me to pass on his greetings too. The country gentry alone were rather chilly and seemed to blame me for your farewell without a farewell. Our good friend Sidonie was even rather caustic, and only dear Frau von Padden, to whom I drove across specially the day before yesterday, was sincerely pleased at your greetings and declaration of love. She said you are a charming woman, “but I should look after you well”. And when I replied that you think me more of an educator than a husband, she said in a low voice, almost as if she were far away, “A little lamb, as white as snow.” Then she broke off.’

Dagobert laughed. ‘ “A little lamb, as white as snow.” There you have it, Cousin. How does the nursery-rhyme go on?’ He was going to tease her more, but gave up when he saw how she had gone pale.

The conversation, mostly concerning their former circumstances, went on for a while longer, and Effi finally learnt from bits and pieces that Innstetten let drop that of the household in Kessin only Johanna had been prepared to join them in the move to Berlin. She had stayed there for the moment, of course, but would arrive in two or three days’ time with the rest of their things; he was glad, he said, that she had decided to come, for she had always been the most useful of the servants and had a certain urban chic. Perhaps a little too much. Christel and Friedrich had declared that they were too old, and from the outset there had been no point in discussing it with Kruse. ‘What’s the point of having a coachman here?’ Innstetten said in conclusion. ‘A horse and carriage, that’s all *tempi passati*, that’s a luxury we shall have to do without in Berlin. We wouldn’t even have had anywhere to put the black hen. Or am I underestimating our apartment?’

Effi shook her head, and when there was a short pause in the conversation her mother stood up; it was almost eleven, she said, and she had some way to go, but she didn’t need anyone to accompany her, the cab-rank was close by—a suggestion that Dagobert naturally rejected. Soon afterwards they left, having agreed to meet the next morning.

Effi was up fairly early and—the air having an almost summer warmth—had had the coffee-table moved close to the open balcony door, and when Innstetten appeared she went out onto the balcony with him and said, ‘So what do you say to this? You wanted to be able to hear the song of the finches in Tiergarten Park and the parrots from the Zoo. I don’t know if they’ll both do you the favour, but it is possible. Did you hear that? It came from over there, from the little park over there. It’s not the actual Tiergarten, but near enough.’

Innstetten was delighted and as grateful as if Effi had waved a magic wand herself to bring it all there. Then they sat down and Annie arrived as well. Roswitha insisted Innstetten should find the child much changed, which he then did. After that they chatted on, about the Kessiners and the people they would have to visit in Berlin, and finally about a summer-holiday trip. But they had to break off in the middle of their discussion to be at their rendezvous on time

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They met, as agreed, at Helms's Restaurant, opposite the Red Castle,* went to various shops, had a meal at Hiller's and were home in good time. It had been a successful outing together, Innstetten really happy to be part of and enjoy city life once more. The next day, the 1st of April, he went to the Chancellor's Palace to add his name to the list of those congratulating Bismarck on his birthday (he didn't present his wishes personally, out of consideration for the Chancellor), then went to report to the Ministry. And he was received, even though it was a very busy day, both socially and as far as work was concerned—indeed, he was even honoured by a particularly amiable welcome from his minister, who said he knew what he had in him and was sure nothing would disrupt their congenial collaboration.

At home, too, everything was turning out well. Effi felt genuinely sorry to see her Mama return to Hohen-Cremmen, after her treatment, as she had suspected from the start, had taken almost six weeks. This feeling was only slightly offset by the fact that Johanna arrived in Berlin on the same day. That was at least something, and even if the pretty blonde did not have the same place in Effi's affection as the totally unselfish and good-natured Roswitha, she was respected both by Innstetten and her young mistress, because she was very adept and useful and showed a distinct and self-assured reserve towards men. A Kessin rumour had it that her origins went back to one of the leading lights of the garrison in Pasewalk, now long since retired, which, it was claimed, explained her superior attitude, her beautiful blond hair, and the particularly sculptural effect of her overall appearance. Johanna herself shared the general pleasure that was felt at her arrival, and was quite happy to assume her previous role as housemaid and Effi's lady's maid, whilst Roswitha, who in her time with them had picked up most of Christel's culinary skills, was put in charge of the kitchen. Effi herself was to take care of Annie, which made Roswitha laugh. She knew what young women were like.

Innstetten was entirely taken up with his work and life at home. He was happier than he had been in Kessin, because it didn't escape him that Effi was more cheerful and uninhibited. And that was because she felt freer. True, the past was still there, but it didn't frighten her any more, or at least much less often and only briefly, and the after-tremors that remained gave her whole being a particular appeal. There was a touch of remorse about everything she did, like a plea for forgiveness, and she would have been happy if she had been able to show all this more clearly. But that was out of the question, of course.

Social life in the big city was not yet over at the beginning of April when they made their first visits, but it was beginning to die down, so that she was never really part of it. It came to a final halt in the second half of May, and she was even happier than before that she could meet Innstetten in Tiergarten Park at midday, when he came out of the Ministry, or take an afternoon walk in the gardens of Charlottenburg Palace.* When she walked up and down the long façade, between the castle and the orange trees, she always looked at the numerous busts of the Roman emperors, seeing a strange similarity between Nero and Titus, would gather cones that had fallen off the weeping pines, and then go, arm in arm with her husband, to the lonely Belvedere over by the River Spree.

'They say that was haunted once as well,' she said.

'No, just apparitions.'

'That's the same thing.'

'Yes, sometimes,' Innstetten said. 'But actually there is a difference. Apparitions are always contrived—at least that's what's supposed to have happened here in the Belvedere, as your cousin Briest told me only yesterday—but a haunting isn't contrived, it's natural.'

'So you do believe in that?'

'Certainly I believe in it. Such things do exist. Only I don't really believe in what we had in Kessin. Has Johanna already shown you her Chinaman?'

'Which one?'

'Well, ours. Before she left our old house she peeled it off the arm of the chair upstairs and put it in her purse. I saw it when I asked her for change for a mark recently. She admitted it, though with some embarrassment.'

'Oh, you shouldn't have told me that, Geert. Now there's something like that in our house again.'

'Tell her to burn it.'

'No, I wouldn't want to do that, and it wouldn't help either. But I'll ask Roswitha …'

'What? Ah, I see, I can guess what you have in mind. She's to buy a picture of a saint and put it in her purse. Is that what it is?'

Effi nodded.

'Well, you do what you want. But don't tell anyone.'

Eventually Effi said she wouldn't bother and, chatting about this and that and, more and more, about their plans for the summer, they drove back to the big roundabout by the Tiergarten, then strolled home along the avenue there and the broad Friedrich-Wilhelms-Strasse.

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They intended to take their holiday at the end of July and go to the Bavarian mountains, where the Oberammergau Passion Play* was to take place again that year. But that turned out to be impossible; Geheimrat von Wüllersdorf, whom Innstetten knew from earlier days and with whom he worked closely now, suddenly fell

ill and Innstetten had to deputize for him. That situation lasted until the middle of August, and only then could they go on holiday. By that time it was too late for Oberammergau, so they decided on the Island of Rügen. 'First of all to Stralsund,* of course, with, as you will know, Schill,* who defended the town against Napoleon, and Scheele,* who, as you won't know, discovered oxygen, but it's not necessary to know that. Then from Stralsund to Bergen and Rugard Hill, from where, as Wüllersdorf told me, you have a view of the whole island; after that along the isthmus between the Greater and Lesser Jasmund Lagoons to Sassnitz. For to go to Rügen is to go to Sassnitz. Binz would be all right as well, but there—to quote Wüllersdorf again—the beach is covered in little stones and shells, and we want to go swimming.'

Effi agreed with all of Innstetten's plans, above all that the household should be split up for the four weeks, with Roswitha taking Annie to Hohen-Cremmen, while Johanna was to go and stay with her half-brother, who was somewhat younger and had a sawmill near Pasewalk. Thus they all had somewhere to go where they would be well looked after. So at the beginning of the next week they set off, and reached Sassnitz that same evening. The sign above the place where they were staying said 'Hotel Fahrenheit'.* 'Their prices are in Celsius, I hope,' Innstetten said, reading the name, and they both set off in the best of moods for an evening stroll along the cliffs, and from a rocky ledge looked out over the calm sea quivering in the moonlight. 'Oh, Geert, that's Capri, that's Sorrento. Yes, we'll stay here. But not in the hotel, of course; the waiters are too superior, you feel embarrassed just asking for a bottle of soda water …'

'Yes, nothing but *attachés*. But I'm sure we'll be able to find a room somewhere.'

'I think so too. We'll start looking right away tomorrow morning.'

The weather in the morning was as beautiful as the evening before, and they breakfasted outside. Innstetten received a number of letters that had to be dealt with quickly, so Effi decided to use the hour she had to herself looking for somewhere to stay. She walked along a meadow fenced with hurdles, then past a few houses and fields of oats, finally turning into a sunken lane that led like a defile down to the sea. Where this lane came out on to the beach there was an inn standing in the shade of tall beeches; it wasn't so grand as the Hotel Fahrenheit, more just a restaurant that was still empty at this early hour. Effi sat at a table with a splendid view, and hardly had she taken a sip of the sherry she had ordered than the landlord came over, half out of curiosity, half out of politeness, to have a chat with her.

'We like it very much here,' she said, 'my husband and I; what a magnificent view out over the bay. Our only concern is finding accommodation.'

'Yes, Madam, that will be difficult.'

'But it's already late in the season.'

'Despite that. There'll not be anything to be found here in Sassnitz, I can guarantee that; but farther along the shore, where the next village begins—you can see the roofs shining from here—it might well be possible.'

'And what is the village called?'

'Crampas.'*

Effi thought she must have misheard. 'Crampas,' she repeated, having to make an effort. 'I've never heard of that as a place-name … Otherwise there's nothing else in the vicinity?'

'No, Madam, not round here. Farther up, to the north, there are more villages; they'll be able to give you information in the hotel right by Stubbenkammer Cliffs. People who would like to rent out rooms always leave their addresses there.'

Effi was glad she had had this conversation with the landlord by herself, and after she'd reported what he'd said to her husband, only omitting the name of the nearby village, he said, 'Well if there's nothing round here, the best thing will be to hire a carriage (you always impress a hotel when you do that) and move up there, towards Stubbenkammer Cliffs. I'm sure we'll be able to find some idyllic place with an ivy-mantled arbour, and if we don't, there's always the hotel itself. It all comes down to the same thing in the end.'

Effi agreed, and by midday they had already reached the hotel by Stubbenkammer that Innstetten had just mentioned, and ordered a light meal there. 'But in half an hour's time. We want to go for a walk first and have a look at Lake Hertha. I presume you have a guide?'

They did, and soon a middle-aged man came over to the two visitors. He looked so solemn and important that he could have been at least an acolyte in the service of the old Teutonic goddess Hertha.

The lake, surrounded by tall trees, was quite close. Bulrushes grew round the edge and there were countless yellow water-lilies floating on the surface.

'It really looks as if it could have been dedicated to Hertha,' Effi said.

'Yes, Madam … and the stones testify to that as well.'

'Which stones?'

'The stones of the sacrificial altar.'*

Continuing the conversation, the three of them went over to a wall of clay and pebbles that had been dug out, and against which several smoothly polished stones had been propped. All had a shallow depression and several channels running down.

'And what was the purpose of *those*?'

'So that it would run off better, Madam.'

'Let's go,' Effi said and, taking her husband's arm, went back with him to the hotel, where the light lunch they

had ordered was waiting for them on a table with an extensive view of the sea. The bay below was bathed in sunlight, with occasional yachts gliding across it and the seagulls playing tig round the nearby cliffs. It was very beautiful, Effi thought; but when she then looked across the glittering expanse she saw, to the south, the brightly shining roofs strung out in the village, the name of which had given her such a shock that morning.

Innstetten, even though he didn't know, or even suspect, what was going on inside her, could see that all her pleasure, her enjoyment, had gone. 'I'm sorry you're not really enjoying being here. You can't forget Lake Hertha, and the stones even less.'

She nodded. 'It's just as you say. And I have to tell you that I've never seen anything in my life that's made me feel so sad. We won't bother looking for rooms; I can't stay here.'

'And only yesterday it was the Gulf of Naples and all sorts of beautiful places.'

'Yes, yesterday.'

'And today? Not even a trace of Sorrento any more?'

'A trace still, but just a trace; it's Sorrento as if it were about to die.'

'Right then, Effi,' Innstetten said, taking her hand, 'I don't want to torment you with Rügen, so we'll abandon the idea. That's settled. We don't have to cling on to Stubbenklammer or Sassnitz or places farther down the coast. But where shall we go, then?'

'I think we should stay here another day, then take the steamer that, if I'm not mistaken, comes from Stettin tomorrow and crosses to Copenhagen. They say there's so much to amuse one there, and I can't tell you how much I'm longing for some amusement. Here I feel as if I'm never going to be able to laugh again in my whole life, as if I never even had laughed, and you know how much I like laughing.'

Innstetten was very sympathetic towards her feelings, and that all the more as in many ways he agreed with her. Everything really was melancholy, however beautiful it was.

So they waited for the boat from Stettin, and two days later they arrived in Copenhagen early in the morning, where they took a room on Kongens Nytorv.* Two hours later they were already in the Thorvaldsen* Museum, and Effi said, 'Yes, Geert, that's lovely and I'm glad we made the journey here.' Soon afterwards they dined and made the acquaintance of a family from Jutland who were sitting opposite them at the residents' table, and whose beautiful daughter, Thora von Penz,* attracted the attention and admiration of both Innstetten and Effi. Effi couldn't stop looking at her big blue eyes and flaxen hair, and when they rose, an hour and a half later, the Penzes—who, unfortunately, had to leave Copenhagen that day—had expressed the hope that they would soon have the pleasure of the young Prussian couple's company in Aggerhuus Castle, three miles from Limfjord, an invitation that the Innstettens accepted with hardly a moment's hesitation. Thus the hours passed in the hotel. But that was not the end of their pleasure on that memorable day, of which Effi said it should be a red-letter day. To cap it all, in the evening there was a performance in the Tivoli Theatre: *Harlequin and Columbine*, an Italian comedy in mime. Effi was enraptured by all the roguish pranks, and when they got back to the hotel late in the evening she said, 'Do you know, Geert, I'm beginning to feel myself again. When I think—without mentioning the fair Thora—Thorvaldsen this morning and *Columbine* this evening …'

'… that you liked better than Thorvaldsen actually …'

'To be honest, yes. That kind of thing does appeal to me. Dear old Kessin was a disaster for me. Everything got on my nerves. Rügen almost did too. I think we should spend a few more days here in Copenhagen, with excursions to Frederiksborg and Elsinore,* of course, and then go across to Jutland. I'm really looking forward to seeing the fair Thora again; if I were a man, I'd fall in love with her.'

Innstetten laughed. 'You don't know what I'll do yet.'

'That wouldn't bother me. We'd fight over you, and you'd see I've still got my own powers.'

'You don't have to tell me that.'

*

Thus their holiday continued. Over in Jutland they sailed up Limfjord to Aggerhuus Castle, where they spent three days with the Penzes and then returned to Germany by many stages, with shorter or longer stops in Viborg, Flensburg, Kiel, and Hamburg (that they liked very much), but not to Berlin and Keithstrasse; rather, they went first to Hohen-Cremmen, where they wanted to enjoy a well-earned rest. For Innstetten that meant only a few days, since his leave was over, but Effi stayed one more week, saying that she only wanted to get back home on the 3rd of October, their wedding anniversary.

Annie had thrived in the country air, and Roswitha's plan for her to walk to her mother in little boots was a complete success. Briest played the affectionate grandfather and warned against showing the child too much love, but even more against being too strict; he was the same as ever in all things. But in fact all his affection was reserved for Effi, and she occupied his thoughts all the time, especially when he was alone with his wife.

'What do you think about Effi?'

'A dear, sweet child, as always. We can't thank God enough that we have such a delightful daughter. And how grateful she is for everything and always so happy to be home with us again.'

'Yes,' Briest said, 'that's a virtue of which she has rather more than I like. It actually seems as if this were still her home. But she has her husband and her child, and the husband's a jewel and the child's an angel, and yet

she behaves as if Hohen-Cremmen were still the most important thing for her and husband and child don't get a look in. She's a splendid daughter, but for me a bit too much so. It frightens me a little. And it's also unfair to Innstetten. How are things between them?'

'What do you mean, Briest?'

'Well, I mean what I mean, and you know what as well. Is she happy? Or is there something getting in the way of that? From the very beginning it seemed to me she felt more respect than love for him. And in my view, that's a bad thing. Love doesn't always last for ever, respect certainly doesn't. Actually, women get irritated when they have to respect someone; first they're irritated, then they're bored, and finally they just laugh.'

'Are you talking from personal experience?'

'I'm not saying that. I was never highly respected enough for that. But let's stop this before we start getting on each other's nerves, Luise. How are things between them?'

'You're always going on about these things, Briest. We must have talked and exchanged our opinions about them more than a dozen times, and you keep coming back with your I-want-to-know-everything attitude, and put your question in such a naive form, as if there were no depths I couldn't plumb. What do you think a young woman, and more specifically your own daughter, is like? Do you think everything's out in the open? Or that I'm an oracle (I can't remember the name just at the moment), or that I'm in full possession of the truth once Effi has poured out her heart to me? Whatever people mean by that. What is "pouring out"? The main thing's always held back. There's no way she's going to tell me her secrets. And anyway, I don't know where she gets this from but she's … yes, she's a sly little woman, and her slyness is all the more dangerous because she's so very charming.'

'So you admit that … charming. And good as well?'

'Good as well. That is, she has a good heart. In other respects I'm not so sure; I think she has a tendency to take things as they come and hope the consequences won't be too severe.'

'You think so?'

'Yes, I think so. Moreover, I think she's improved in many respects. Her character is her character, but since they moved their circumstances have become much more favourable, and they're settling down more and more into life with each other. She said something like that to me and, what is more important, I found it confirmed, saw it with my own eyes.'

'What did she say, then?'

'She said, "Things are getting better now, Mama. Innstetten was always an excellent man, there aren't many like him, but I could never really get close to him, there was something alien about him. And he was alien in his tenderness. Yes, then most of all; there were times when I was afraid of it." '

'Too true, too true.'

'What do you mean by that, Briest? That I was afraid, or are you saying you were afraid? Both seem ridiculous to me …'

'You were going to tell me about Effi.'

'Well, then she told me this feeling of something alien had gone, and that made her very happy. Kessin hadn't been the right place for her, she said, the haunted house and the people there, some too pious, the others too dull. But since they've moved to Berlin she felt she belonged there. He was the best of men, she said, a little too old for her and a little too good for her, but now she was out of the woods. That's the expression she used, and it struck me.'

'Why? It's not the most elegant of expressions, but …'

'There was something behind it. And she wanted to hint at that.'

'You think so?'

'Yes, Briest. You always think butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. But you're wrong there. She's happy to drift along with the current, and if it's going in the right direction she's good. But swimming against the tide isn't her strong point.'

Roswitha came in with Annie and the conversation broke off.

*

This conversation between Briest and his wife took place on the day when Innstetten left Hohen-Cremmen to travel back to Berlin, leaving Effi there for at least a further week. He knew there was nothing she liked better than to be able to spend the time daydreaming, in a relaxed mood, with never a care in the world, never a harsh word, just the repeated assurance of how charming she was. Yes, that was what did her good, and this time again she gratefully enjoyed it to the full, despite the lack of any diversions: visitors were rare because, since her marriage, the house lacked real attraction, at least for the younger element, and even the parsonage and the schoolhouse were not what they had been in the past. The schoolhouse was half empty, in the spring the twins had married two teachers from the Genthin* area, a big double wedding with a report in the local paper, and Hulda had gone to Friesack* to care for a wealthy old aunt who, as was common in such cases, turned out to be living much longer than the Niemeyers had assumed. Despite that, Hulda kept writing contented letters, not because she really was contented (on the contrary), but to avoid giving even a hint that life could be anything

but good for such an excellent person as herself. Niemeyer, a doting father, showed the letters with pride and pleasure, whilst Jahnke, whose life also centred entirely round his daughters, had worked out that the two young women would give birth on the same day, namely Christmas Eve. Effi laughed heartily and told the grandfather-to-be she would like to be asked to be godmother, but then dropped the subject of family news and told him about 'Kjöbenhavn' and Elsinore, about Limfjord and Aggerhuus Castle, and above all about Thora von Penz, whom she could only describe as 'typically Scandinavian', blue eyes, flaxen hair, and always wearing a red velvet dress with a tight waist. At this Jahnke became misty-eyed, and said again and again, 'Yes, that's the way they are, pure Teutons, much more German than the Germans.'

Effi wanted to be back in Berlin by the 3rd of October, her wedding anniversary. Now it was the evening before and, under the pretext that she wanted to pack and get everything ready for the return journey, she had withdrawn to her room relatively early. In fact, what she really wanted was to be alone; however much she liked chatting, there were times when she longed for peace and quiet.

The rooms she had on the upper floor gave on to the garden; Roswitha and Annie were sleeping in the smaller one, the door slightly ajar; in the larger one she walked up and down; the lower windows were open and the little white net curtains billowed in the breeze, slowly coming to rest over the arm of a chair until another breeze came and released them. It was still so light that the titles under the pictures hanging over the sofa in their narrow gilt frames could be clearly read: 'The Storming of Düppel,* Redoubt V', and beside it, 'King William I and Count Bismarck on the Heights of Lipa'.* Effi shook her head and smiled. 'The next time I come I'll ask for some different pictures; I can't stand all this martial stuff.' Then she closed one window and sat down at the other, leaving it open. How comforting it all was. The moon was beside the church tower, casting its light over the lawn with the sundial and the beds of heliotrope. Everything was a shimmer of silver, and there were strips of light alongside the strips of shade, like linen on the bleach-field. Farther away were the tall, giant rhubarb plants, their leaves an autumnal yellow, and she was reminded of the day, only a little over two years ago, when she had played there with Hulda and the two Jahnke girls. And then, when their visitor arrived, she'd gone up the stone steps beside the bench, and one hour later she'd been engaged.

She stood up and went over to the door and listened: Roswitha was already asleep, and Annie as well.

All at once, thinking of the child, all sorts of images from her days in Kessin came back to mind: their house with its gable and the veranda with the view of the Plantation, and she was sitting in the rocking-chair; and then Crampas came up to wish her a good morning, and then Roswitha with the child, and she took her and lifted her up and kissed her.

'That was the first day; that was when it began.' Musing on this, she left the room where Roswitha and Annie were sleeping and sat down at the open window again, and looked out into the quiet night.

'I can't rid myself of it,' she said. 'And what the worst thing about it is, what makes me doubt myself …'

At that moment the clock in the tower outside started to strike, and Effi counted the hours.

'Ten … And at this time tomorrow I'll be in Berlin. And we'll talk about it being our wedding anniversary and he'll say nice, friendly, perhaps even affectionate things to me. And I'll be sitting there listening to them and bearing this guilt inside me.'

She rested her head on her hand and stared into space, silent.

'And bearing this guilt inside me,' she repeated. 'Yes, I am. But does it weigh down on me? No. And that's why I'm horrified at myself. What does weigh down on me is something else—fear, mortal fear, and the constant dread that it will eventually come out after all. And then, apart from the fear … shame. I'm ashamed of myself. But just as I don't feel true remorse, I don't feel true shame. I just feel ashamed because of the eternal lies and deception; I always took pride in the fact that I couldn't lie and didn't need to lie; lying's so contemptible, and now I've had to lie all the time, to him and to the whole wide world, little lies and big lies, and Rummschüttel noticed and shrugged his shoulders; who knows what he thinks of me, certainly not very highly. Yes, I'm tormented by fear and shame at my deception. But shame at my guilt, that's something I *don't* feel, or not real shame, or not enough, and the fact that I don't feel it is killing me. If all women are like that, it's terrible, and if, as I hope, they're not like that, then I'm in a bad way, then there's something wrong inside me, then I lack a feeling for what is right. And old Niemeyer told me that, when I was still half a child: a feeling for what is right, that was the important thing, and if you had that then the worst would never happen to you, and if you didn't have it then you were in constant danger and what people call the devil would have you in his power. Merciful God, is that what things are like with me?'

And she put her head in her arms and wept bitter tears.

When she sat up again she had calmed down, and looked out at the garden again. Everything was so quiet, and a soft, gentle sound, like rain, came from the plane trees.

She stayed like that for a while. From the village street came the sound of someone bawling: Kulicke, the night-watchman, was calling the hour, and when he finally fell silent she heard the distant rattle of a train, two miles away as it passed Hohen-Cremmen. Then the sound died away until silence reigned once more, and there was just the moonlight on the lawn and just the rustle of the plane trees, like rain falling.

But it was only the night air stirring.

Chapter 25

The next evening Effi was back in Berlin and Innstetten was there at the station; Rollo was with him and trotted along beside the carriage as they drove, chatting, through Tiergarten Park.

'I thought you weren't going to keep your word.'

'But of course I'll keep my word, Geert, that comes before everything else.'

'Don't say that. To always keep one's word is asking a lot of oneself. And sometimes one can't. Just think back. I was expecting you back in Kessin while you were here looking for an apartment, and who didn't come? My Effi.'

'Oh yes, but that was something different.'

She couldn't bring herself to say 'I was ill,' and Innstetten passed over it. He had a lot of other things on his mind that concerned his work and his social position. 'Actually, Effi, our life in Berlin is only just beginning. When we moved here in April the season was coming to an end, there was just enough time for us to make our visits, and Wüllersdorf, the only one we were closer too—well, unfortunately he's a bachelor. From the beginning of June everything goes to sleep and the lowered blinds announce from a hundred yards off: "All gone away"—whether it's true or not makes no difference … What was there left for us to do? The occasional chat with your cousin Briest, a meal at Hiller's now and then, that's not real city life. But things are going to be different now. I've noted down the names of all the senior officials who are still socially active enough to keep open house. And we'll do that *as well*, keep open house, and when winter comes then the whole Ministry will be saying, 'Yes, the most charming woman we have now is Frau von Innstetten.'

'Oh, Geert, is that really you? You're talking like an admirer.'

'It's our anniversary, so you'll have to make allowances for me.'

*

Innstetten was seriously determined to exchange the quiet life he had led while he had been a Landrat for a socially much livelier one, for his own and, even more, Effi's sake. But it began slowly, with only an occasional outing, and the best part of their new life was exactly the same as in the preceding six months, life in their own home. Wüllersdorf often came, Cousin Dagobert as well, and once they were there they would send up to the Gizickis, a young couple that had the apartment above. Gizicki himself was a Landesgerichtsrat,* his bright and lively wife had been a Fräulein von Schmettau. Occasionally they made music, for a short while had even tried whist, but gave it up because they found chatting a pleasanter way to spend an evening. Until recently the Gizickis had lived in a little town in Upper Silesia, and Wüllersdorf had even—though quite a few years ago, of course—been in a variety of one-eyed places in Posen Province* and liked to declaim the well-known mocking rhyme:

> Schrimm
> Is grim,
> You're lost in
> Kosten,
> But you really don't want to go
> To Ostrowo.

No one was more amused at this than Effi, and it usually led to an abundance of stories about provincial life. Kessin, with Gieshübler and Marietta Trippelli, Ring the forester, and Sidonie Grasenabb, took its turn, and Innstetten, if he was in a good mood, was as frivolous as one could wish. 'Yes,' he would say then, 'dear old Kessin. I have to say that it had a wealth of characters, first and foremost Crampas, Major Crampas, quite the beau and a bit of a Barbarossa,* to whom my wife—I don't know, should I say inexplicably or understandably—took a great liking …' 'Let's say understandably,' Wüllersdorf interjected, 'for I assume he was chairman of the Club and took part in plays, as a lover or a *bon vivant*. And perhaps there was more, perhaps he was a tenor as well.' Innstetten confirmed his guesses and Effi tried to play along with a laugh, but it took a great effort, and when their guests left and Innstetten withdrew to his room to work through a pile of papers, she was tormented by the past once more and felt as if there were a shadow following her.

She continued to suffer these alarms, but they became rarer and milder, which was not surprising, given the way her life developed. The love shown her, not only by Innstetten but by people who were less close to her, and not least the almost affectionate friendship of the Minister's wife, a young woman herself, at least reduced the worries and fears of the past, and when, after a second year and on the occasion of the establishment of a new charitable institution, the Empress chose the 'Frau Geheimrätin' as one of the ladies of honour on the committee, and at the court ball the old Emperor addressed a few gracious words to the beautiful young woman, of whom, he said, he'd already heard, they gradually disappeared. It had happened, but far, far away, as if on

another planet, and everything dissipated like mist and became a dream.

The Hohen-Cremmen family came to visit them from time to time, and were delighted to see their children so happy. Annie continued to develop—'as beautiful as her grandmother,' old Briest said—and if there was one cloud on the horizon, it was that it seemed almost certain that Little Annie would remain an only child; the Innstetten line (for there were not even others of that name) was therefore presumably dying out. Briest, who, being interested in the Briests alone, tended to take a rather casual attitude as far as the survival of other families was concerned, joked about it and said, 'Yes, Innstetten, if it goes on like this, when the time comes Annie will have to marry a banker (a Christian one,* I hope, if there are still some of those left) and then the Emperor, out of regard for the old baronial line of Innstettens, will enable Annie's high-finance children to live on in the *Almanach de Gotha** or, what is less important, Prussian history, under the name of "von der Innstetten".'—Comments to which Innstetten responded with a slightly embarrassed smile, Frau von Briest with a shrug of the shoulders, and Effi with amusement. She was proud of her noble birth, but only for herself, and she would definitely have had nothing against an elegant banker, who was a man of the world and, above all, very, very rich, as a son-in-law.

Yes, Effi, the way attractive young women are, didn't take the question of an heir too seriously; but after a long, long time—they were already in the seventh year in their new situation—Rummschüttel, who had a certain reputation in the area of gynaecology, was finally called in for advice by Frau von Briest. He prescribed a course at the mineral spa of Bad Schwalbach.* However, since Effi had suffered from catarrh since the previous winter and had even had her lungs checked, he said finally, 'So, first Schwalbach, my dear Frau Baronin, let's say three weeks, and then the same time in Ems.* The Geheimrat can be there with you in Ems. It does mean three weeks' separation, however, but that's the best I can do for you, Innstetten.'

That was agreed, and it was further decided that Effi should travel together with a Geheimrätin von Zwicker, 'as a chaperone for the latter', as Briest said, not without some justification, since Frau Zwicker, despite being well into her forties, had much greater need of a chaperone than Effi. Innstetten, who was once more very occupied with deputizing, complained that, never mind Schwalbach, he would probably have to forgo their time together in Ems as well. The date of departure was set for the 24th of June, and Roswitha helped her mistress pack and make a list of her underlinen. Effi loved her as much as ever; Roswitha was the only person with whom she could talk freely and uninhibitedly about the past, about Kessin and Crampas, the Chinaman and Captain Thomsen's niece.

'Tel me, Roswitha, you're a Catholic. Do you go to confession?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'I used to go, but I never confessed to my real sins.'

'That's very wrong. In that way it can't help.'

'Oh, Madam, everyone in our village did that. And some of them even just giggled.'

'Have you never felt, if you have something weighing down on you, that it would be a relief if it could come out?'

'No, Madam. I was afraid when my father came at me with the red-hot iron bar; I was terribly afraid, but that was all.'

'Not of God?'

'Not really, Madam. If you're so afraid of your father, as I was, then you're not really that much afraid of God. I'd always thought God was good and would help a poor thing like me.'

Effi smiled and broke off the conversation. She thought it natural that poor Roswitha should say that, but still she said, 'You know, Roswitha, we'll have to have a serious talk about this when I get back. After all, it was a great sin.'

'That about the child, that it starved to death? Yes, Madam, it was. But that wasn't me, that was the others … And then, it was such a long time ago.'

Chapter 26

It was the fifth week of Effi's absence from home, and she was writing happy, almost over-exuberant letters, especially since she had arrived in Ems where, as she said, they could enjoy company again, that is, the company of men—the occasional one who had appeared in Schwalbach had been the exception to the rule. Geheimrätin Zwicker, her travelling companion, she went on, had questioned the value of such an additional ingredient for their cure and expressed strong disapproval of it, all of that, of course, with a look on her face that rather said the opposite. Frau Zwicker was delightful, Effi wrote, somewhat free and easy, probably even a woman with a past, but highly amusing, and there was a lot one could learn from her; never had she felt so much of a child, despite being twenty-five, as she had since making the acquaintance of this lady. And she was so very well read, in foreign literature as well, and recently, for example, when she, Effi, had talked about *Nana*[*] and asked her whether it really was so terrible, Frau Zwicker had said, 'My dear Frau Baronin, what is terrible? There are much worse things.'

'She seemed', Effi said in conclusion, 'to want to make me acquainted with these "different things", but I declined the offer because I know that you blame the immorality of our times on these and similar things, and rightly so, I suspect. But I haven't yet felt any relief. One of the reasons is that Ems lies in an enclosed valley and we suffer very much from the heat.'

Innstetten had read that last letter with mixed feelings; he had been somewhat amused, but was also a little unhappy with it. Frau Zwicker wasn't the woman for Effi, who did have a tendency to let herself be led astray. But he abandoned the idea of writing to her along those lines, partly because he didn't want to upset her, but even more because, as he told himself, it wouldn't make any difference. At the same time, he was longing for his wife's return and complaining that in his case, now that all his colleagues were away, or intended to get away, 'the unvarying hour of duty'[*] had been varied, indeed doubled.

Yes, Innstetten was longing for some interruption to his life of work and loneliness, and there were similar feelings out in the kitchen, where Annie liked to spend most of her time once school was over, as was quite natural, since Roswitha and Johanna not only loved Fräulein Annie equally but continued to get on well with each other. This friendship between the two maids was a favourite topic of conversation for the various friends of the family, and Gizicki said to Wüllersdorf, 'I see in that a new confirmation of the old adage, "Let me have men about me that are fat."[*] Caesar was a good judge of character, and knew that qualities such as contentment and affability only come with *embonpoint*.' And that word could genuinely be used for the two maids, though with the difference that in the case of Roswitha it was something of a euphemism, whilst for Johanna it was, to use another unavoidable foreign expression, the *mot juste*. The latter couldn't actually be called corpulent, she was just buxom and shapely, and her blue eyes looked out on the world over her satisfyingly ample bosom with a particular expression of self-assurance that suited her well. With an innate sense of propriety and decorum, she was filled with pride at the idea of being the servant of a good family, and her feeling of superiority over Roswitha, who had retained something of her peasant origins, was such that her only response to the occasional preference shown to the latter was a quiet smile. This preferential treatment—well, if it had to be, it was just one of the Mistress's charming little foibles that one couldn't begrudge dear old Roswitha, with her eternal story of her father with the red-hot iron rod. 'If you have more self-respect that kind of thing can't happen.' That was something she thought but never said. It was a life of friendly collaboration. However, what particularly contributed to peace and harmony was the fact that there was an unspoken agreement to take separate roles in the treatment—one could almost say upbringing—of Annie. Roswitha had charge of the poetic department, telling fairy-tales and stories; Johanna, on the other hand, took care of decorum, a division of labour that was so deeply rooted on both sides that disputes over areas of responsibility hardly ever arose. This was helped by the fact that Annie had a decided tendency to accentuate the upper-class Fräulein, a role in which she could have had no better teacher than Johanna.

To recapitulate: both maids had equal status in Annie's eyes. However, during those days when they were preparing for Effi's return Roswitha was once again one step ahead of her rival, because the whole business of arranging the welcome home had fallen to her, as the competent authority. The welcome fell into two main parts: a garland with a wreath, and then, to finish off with, the recitation of a poem. Eventually the garland and wreath had—after they'd wavered between 'W.' and 'E. v. I.' for a while—caused no particular problem ('W.' woven in forget-me-nots was the preferred version), but the difficulties caused by the question of the poem might have remained unresolved had not Roswitha had the courage to corner the judge on the stairs as he was returning from a session in court and boldly request a 'poem' from him. Gizicki, a very amiable gentleman, had immediately agreed, and late in the same afternoon his cook had delivered the desired lines, which were as follows:

> Mama, we've been waiting ages for you,
> For weeks and days and hours,

Now we greet you with welcome true
And garlands woven with flowers.
Papa is laughing with joy, and says,
'Gone are those wifeless, motherless days
That left me so sad and alone.'
And Roswitha's laughing, Johanna as well,
And Annie jumps up with her poem to tell,
And cries out 'Welcome home, welcome home.'

Of course the little poem was learnt off by heart that very evening, but at the same time subjected to a critical review of its beauty—or non-beauty. At first, Johanna said, the emphasis on wife and mother had seemed correct, but there was something about it that might cause offence and, speaking personally, she would feel offended by 'wife and mother'. Annie, slightly concerned by this, promised to show the poem to her teacher in the morning, and came back with the comment that the teacher was perfectly happy with 'wife and mother', but all the more against 'Roswitha and Johanna'—to which Roswitha replied that the teacher was a stupid ninny and that was what happened when you spent too much time studying.

It was on a Wednesday that the maids and Annie had had this conversation and settled the argument about the line that had been criticized. The next morning—a letter from Effi setting the day when she would arrive home, probably not until the end of the next week, was expected—Innstetten went to the Ministry. It was nearly midday, school was out, and when Annie, her satchel on her back, came towards Keithstrasse from the canal she met Roswitha outside their house.

'Now let's see who can get up the steps first,' Annie said. Roswitha didn't want to race but Annie shot off, stumbled as she reached the top in such a way that she hit her head on the foot-scraper, and started to bleed badly. Roswitha, panting along behind, pulled the bell, and after Johanna had carried the somewhat frightened child in, they discussed what to do. 'We'll send for the doctor … We'll send for the Master … Lene from the porter's lodge must be home from school now.' Those ideas were abandoned because they'd take too long, something had to be done at once, so they laid the girl on the sofa and started to cool the wound with cold water. That went well, and they began to calm down. 'And now we must bandage her up,' Roswitha finally said. 'That long bandage the Mistress cut when she sprained her ankle on the ice last winter must still be around somewhere …'—'Of course, of course,' Johanna said, 'but where? Oh yes, now I remember. It's in the sewing-table. It'll be locked, but the lock's child's play. Just get the chisel, Roswitha, we'll break the lid open.' And they did force the lid up and started to rummage round in the compartments, above and below, but the rolled-up bandage wasn't to be found. 'But I know I saw it,' Roswitha said, and as, half in irritation, they continued their search, everything they got their hands on was chucked on to the broad windowsill: sewing things, pincushions, reels of cotton and silk, little dried-up posies of violets, cards, notes, and finally, a little packet of letters that had been right at the bottom, under the third tray, tied up with a red thread. But the bandage still wasn't there.

At that moment Innstetten came in.

'Oh, Lord!' said Roswitha, startled, and went over to the child. 'It's nothing, sir. Annie fell on the foot-scraper … God, what will the Mistress say? Yet it's a good thing she wasn't there when it happened.'

In the meantime Innstetten had taken the temporary compress off and seen that it was a deep cut but otherwise not dangerous. 'It's not serious,' he said. 'Still, Roswitha, we'll have to get Rummschüttel to come. Lene can go, she'll have time now. But what on earth is all this with the sewing-table?'

And Roswitha told him how they'd been looking for the rolled-up bandage; but now she was going to give up and cut a new strip of linen.

Innstetten was happy with that, and sat down by the child once the two maids had left the room. 'You're so wild, Annie, you get that from your Mama. Always dashing round like a whirlwind. But nothing ever comes of it, or at best something like this.' And he pointed at the cut and gave her a kiss. 'But you didn't cry, that's a brave girl, and for that reason I'll forgive you for being wild. I imagine the doctor'll be here in an hour; you do everything he tells you, and once he's bandaged it up, don't you press and pull and tear at it, then it'll heal quickly and everything will be all right again, or almost, by the time Mama comes home. But it's a good thing that won't be until next week—the end of next week, she wrote. I've just had a letter from her; she sends you her best wishes and is looking forward to seeing you again.'

'Actually, you could read the letter out to me, Papa.'

'Of course I will.'

But before he could, Johanna came to say that lunch was served. Annie got up with him, despite her injury, and father and daughter sat down to lunch together.

Chapter 27

Innstetten and Annie sat facing each other without speaking for a while; finally, when he began to find the silence embarrassing, he asked a few questions about the headmistress and which teacher she liked best. Annie answered them, but listlessly, because she sensed his mind was elsewhere. Things only got better when, after the second course, Johanna whispered to her that there was more to come. And indeed, Roswitha, who thought she owed her little darling something on this day of misfortune, had gone to the trouble of making an omelette with apple slices.

Seeing this loosened Annie's tongue, and Innstetten's mood had also improved when the bell rang and Dr Rummschüttel came in. Quite by chance. He had just popped in, with no idea that he'd been asked to call. He was happy with the compresses that had been applied. 'Send out for some lead lotion and keep Annie at home tomorrow. Rest above all.' Then he asked about the Frau Baronin and what news they'd had from Ems; he'd come round and check the next day, he said.

*

When they'd finished lunch and gone into the adjoining room—the one where they'd searched for the bandage, so furiously and yet unsuccessfully—Annie was bedded down on the sofa again. Johanna came and sat with the child while Innstetten started to put away all the things that were still lying in a jumble on the windowsill. Now and then he didn't know where they went, and had to ask.

'Where were the letters, Johanna?'

'Right at the bottom,' she said, 'in that compartment there.'

And while he was asking he looked more closely at the little bundle tied together with a red thread, that seemed to consist more of a number of notes rather than letters. He ran his thumb across the side of the bundle, as if it were a pack of cards, and a few lines, actually only individual words, flitted past his eye. There was no question of clearly recognizing them, but he had the feeling he'd seen the handwriting somewhere before. Should he check?

'You could bring us the coffee, Johanna. Annie will have half-a-cup too. The doctor didn't forbid it, and anything that's not forbidden is allowed.'

As he said that, he undid the red thread and, while Johanna left the room, quickly leafed through the whole bundle. Only two or three letters had an address: 'Frau Landrat von Innstetten.' Now he recognized the handwriting; it was the Major's. Innstetten was unaware of any correspondence between Crampas and Effi, and his head started to spin. He put the bundle in his pocket and went back to his room. A few minutes later Johanna knocked on the door to tell him the coffee was ready. Innstetten replied, but otherwise everything remained quiet. A quarter of an hour later he could be heard walking up and down on the carpet. 'What can be the matter with your Papa?' Johanna said to Annie. 'The doctor told him it was nothing.'

*

The sound of Innstetten walking up and down went on and on. Finally he reappeared in the adjoining room and said, 'Keep an eye on the child, Johanna, make sure she stays resting on the sofa. I'm going out for a walk for an hour, perhaps two.'

Then he gave the child an intent look and left.

'Did you see what Papa looked like, Johanna?'

'Yes, Annie. There must be something that's annoyed him very much. He was quite pale. I've never seen him like that before.'

Hours passed. The sun had already set, leaving just a red glow over the roofs, when Innstetten came back. He took Annie by the hand, asked how she was, and then told Johanna to take the lamp to his room, which she did. In the lampshade were half-transparent ovals with photographs, all portraits of his wife; they had been taken in Kessin, when they had photographed all the various people who had acted in Wiechert's *One False Step*. Innstetten slowly turned the shade round and scrutinized every picture. Then he stopped that, opened the balcony door because it felt stuffy, and picked up the bundle of letters again. It seemed that when he had first gone through them he had taken out a few and put them on top. He now read these again in a quiet voice.

'Be at the dunes again this afternoon, behind the mill. We can talk undisturbed at old Adermann's place, the house is pretty isolated. You mustn't be so afraid of everything. We have a right *as well*, and if you keep telling yourself that, all your fear will fall away. Life wouldn't be worth living if all the rules we happen to have were truly valid. All that is best is beyond them. Learn how to enjoy it.'

' … Away, you write, let us escape. Impossible. I can't abandon my wife, abandon her to poverty into the bargain. It's just

not possible and we have to accept that with a light heart, otherwise we're lost. A light heart is the best thing we can have. Everything is destined. It had to be. Would you want it any different, wish we had never met?'

Then came the third letter.

' … Be at the usual place again today. What are my days here going to be like without you! In this dreary dump. I'm in despair, but in just one thing you are right: it's our salvation, and when all is said and done we must bless the fate that has ordained our separation.'

Innstetten had put the letters aside again when the doorbell rang. Johanna immediately came to announce, 'Geheimrat Wüllersdorf.'

Wüllersdorf came in, and could tell at a glance that something must have happened.

'You must forgive me, Wüllersdorf, for having asked you to come round straight away. I don't like to disturb anyone's quiet evening, least of all that of an overworked Ministerialrat. But there was no other way. Please make yourself comfortable. Here, have a cigar.'

Wüllersdorf sat down. Innstetten was walking up and down again and, with the restlessness that was eating away at him, would have liked to remain in motion. But he saw that was not possible, so he took a cigar himself, sat down opposite Wüllersdorf, and tried to remain calm.

'There are', he said, 'two things I want to ask of you: firstly, to deliver a challenge, and secondly, to act as my second; the first is not a pleasant task, the second even less so. Your answer is?'

'I am, as you know, Innstetten, at your disposal. But before you tell me what it's about, permit me to ask a rather naive question: does it have to be? We're both of us too well on in years, you to pick up a pistol, me to support you. Now don't misunderstand me, that isn't a no. How could I refuse you? But now tell me what it is.'

'It's a lover of my wife who at the same time was my friend. Or almost.'

Wüllersdorf looked at Innstetten. 'That's not possible, Innstetten.'

'It's more than possible. Just read these.'

Wüllersdorf glanced through them. 'These are to your wife?'

'Yes. I found them in her sewing-table today.'

'And who wrote them?'

'Major Crampas.'

'Things, then, that happened while you were in Kessin?'

Innstetten nodded.

'So it was six years ago, or six-and-a-half?'

'Yes.'

Wüllersdorf remained silent.

After a while Innstetten said, 'It almost looks as if those six or seven years make some kind of impression on you, Wüllersdorf. Of course, there is a theory that a kind of statute of limitation operates in these cases, but I don't know if it comes into effect here.'

'I don't know either,' Wüllersdorf said. 'But, frankly, I have to say that seems to be the all-important question.'

Innstetten stared at him. 'You're saying that in all seriousness?'

'In all seriousness. It's not something about which one should indulge in witticisms or dialectical hair-splitting.'

'I'd be interested to know what you mean by that. Give me your honest opinion: what do you think of the matter?'

'You're in a terrible situation, Innstetten, and it's the end of your happiness. But if you shoot your wife's lover your happiness will be doubly at an end, so to speak; you will be adding the hurt done to others to the hurt done to you. Everything revolves round the one question: do you have to do it? Do you feel so hurt, insulted, outraged that one of you has to be done away with, him or you? Is that the way it is?'

'I don't know.'

'You must know.'

Innstetten jumped up, went over to the window, and tapped the glass, full of nervous agitation. Then he quickly turned round again, strode over to Wüllersdorf, and said, 'No, that's not the way it is.'

'What is, then?'

'The way it is, I'm desperately unhappy; I've been hurt, I've been shamefully deceived, but despite that I don't feel any hatred at all, and certainly not a thirst for revenge. And when I ask myself why I don't, all that occurs to me is the years that have passed. People are always talking about guilt beyond redemption; in the sight of God I'm sure that's wrong, and for human beings as well. I'd never have thought that time, purely as time, could have that effect. And another thing is that I love my wife, yes, strange to say, I still love her, and however dreadful I think all that has happened is, I'm still so much under the spell of her appeal, of a vivacious charm that is all her own, that right down to the bottom of my heart I feel, despite myself, inclined to forgive her.'

Wüllersdorf nodded. 'I'm with you there entirely, Innstetten, I might well feel the same. But if that's how you view the matter and you tell me, "I love this woman so much, I can forgive her everything," and if we take that other aspect into account, the fact that it's all so far in the past, like something that happened on another planet,

well, if that's the way it is, why then all this fuss, Innstetten?'

'Because, in spite of all that, it has to be. I've thought it through this way and that. We're not just separate individuals, we're part of a whole, and we must always consider the whole, we're entirely dependent on it. If it were possible to live in isolation, I could let it go. Then I would be the one bearing the burden I had taken up myself, true happiness would be a thing of the past, but many, many people have to live without this "true happiness", and I would have to do that too—and I'd be able to. You don't need to be happy, and in no sense do you have a right to be, and it's not necessary to eliminate the person who has taken your happiness away from you. If you're willing to turn your back on the world for the rest of your life, you can let him go. But there's a something that has developed in our social existence, it's there and we have become accustomed to judging everything according to its laws. And disregarding it's not possible; society would despise us, and eventually we would despise ourselves as well and be unable to bear it and blow our brains out. Forgive me for holding forth like this, when what I'm saying is something everyone's said to himself a hundred times. But who can say anything new, anyway? So, to recapitulate, it's not about hatred or anything like that, I don't want to have blood on my hands because of the happiness that's been taken away from me; but that—tyrannical, if you like—social something is not concerned with charm, nor with love, nor with the lapse of time. I have no choice. I have to.'

'I don't know, Innstetten …'

Innstetten smiled. 'You are to decide that yourself, Wüllersdorf. It's now ten o'clock. Six hours ago, this I will concede in advance, the decision was still in my hands, I could take one course or the other, there was still a way out. Not any more, now I'm stuck in a blind alley. If you want, you can say it's my own fault; I should have kept myself under control better, kept everything hidden inside me, wrestled with the problem in my own heart. But it came too suddenly, it was too strong, so that I can hardly blame myself for not exercising proper control over my nerves. I went to your house and left a note, and with that the decision was out of my hands. From that moment on there was a third party who was half-aware of my misfortune and, what carries more weight, the stain on my honour; and after our first exchanges here he is fully aware of them. And because that third party exists, there is no way back for me.'

'I don't know,' Wüllersdorf repeated. 'I don't like having recourse to a hackneyed expression but there's no better way to put it: Innstetten, your secret's safe with me.'

'Yes, Wüllersdorf, that's what people always say. But there's no such thing as absolute discretion. Even if you prove me wrong and are discretion itself, as far as others are concerned, you know about it and nothing can save me from you, who have just agreed with me, who have even said you're entirely with me. From this moment on I will be, and remain, an object of your sympathy (which in itself isn't very pleasant), and, whether you want to or not, you will be checking every word I exchange with my wife, and when my wife talks of fidelity or, as women do, sits in judgement on another woman, then I won't know where to look; and should it happen that in some discussion concerning an ordinary insult I speak in favour of letting it go, "because of the lack of any intention to hurt", or something like that, a smile will cross your face, or at least the corners of your mouth will twitch, and in your mind you'll be thinking, "Dear old Innstetten, he really has a passion for measuring the precise size of all insults but he never gets it right. Nothing has ever stuck in his throat" … Am I right or not, Wüllersdorf?'

Wüllersdorf had stood up. 'I think it's terrible that you are right, but you *are* right. I won't torment you any longer with my "does it have to be?" The world is the way it is, and things don't proceed the way we want them to but the way *others* want them to. People who pompously talk of a duel as referring the matter to the judgement of God are talking nonsense, in fact it's the opposite, our cult of honour is worship of a false idol, but we have to submit as long as the idol rules.'

Innstetten nodded.

They stayed together for another quarter of an hour, and it was decided that Wüllersdorf should set off that very evening. There was a night train that left at twelve.

Then they parted with a brief, 'See you in Kessin.'

Chapter 28

As agreed, Innstetten set off the next evening. He took the same train as Wüllersdorf had the previous day, and soon after five in the morning he was at the station where the road to Kessin went off to the left. As always, as long as the season went on, the steamer set off once the train had arrived, and Innstetten could hear the first hoot of its siren as he reached the bottom of the steps down the railway embankment. It was only three minutes to the landing-stage. He went over to it and greeted the captain, who looked somewhat embarrassed, so must have heard about the business the previous day, and took a seat close to the helm. Immediately the boat cast off from the landing-stage; the weather was magnificent, bright morning sunshine, only a few passengers on board. Innstetten thought back to the day when, coming back from their honeymoon, he had driven along the Kessine here in an open carriage with Effi—it had been a grey November day then, but his heart had been full of joy. Now it was the other way round: the light was outside and the November day was inside him. He had come this way many, many times, and the peace over the meadows, the cattle in the enclosures that looked up as he drove past, the people at work, the fruitful fields had all been balm to his senses, and now, in contrast to those days, he was glad when some clouds drifted over and quietly started to cover the bright blue sky. Thus they sailed down the river, and once they had crossed the splendid expanse of the Breitling the church tower of Kessin came into view, and immediately after that the Embankment and the long row of houses with ships and boats moored in front. And now the steamer was tied up. Innstetten said goodbye to the captain and went to the gangplank, that had been pushed over to the boat to make disembarking easier. Wüllersdorf was already there. Without a word they shook hands, then went across the Embankment to Hoppensack's Hotel, where they sat down under the awning.

'I took a room here yesterday,' Wüllersdorf said, not wanting to start on the business in hand right away. 'When you think that Kessin is just a little hole, it's astonishing to find such a good hotel here. I don't doubt that my friend, the head waiter, speaks three languages; to go by his hairstyle and his cutaway waistcoat, it wouldn't be too bold to make it four … Jean, would you bring us coffee and brandy, please.'

Innstetten understood perfectly why Wüllersdorf was adopting this tone and was happy to go along with it, but he couldn't quite control his agitation, and without thinking took out his watch.

'We've plenty of time,' Wüllersdorf said. 'An hour and a half, or as good as. I've ordered the carriage for a quarter past eight; it won't take us more than ten minutes.'

'And where?'

'At first Crampas suggested a corner of the woods, just past the churchyard. But then he broke off and said, "No, not there." Then we agreed on a place in the dunes. Close to the beach; there's a gap in the last dune with a view through to the sea.'

Innstetten smiled. 'Crampas seems to have selected a beauty-spot. That was always his way. How did he take it?'

'Wonderfully.'

'Arrogant? Flippant?'

'Neither the one nor the other. I have to confess, Innstetten, I was really shaken. When I gave your name he went deathly pale and had to struggle to maintain his composure, and I could see the corners of his mouth were quivering. But all that lasted just for a moment, then he had himself under control again and from then on he was all resigned melancholy. I'm quite sure he has the feeling he's not going to come out of this in one piece, and doesn't want to, either. If my assessment's correct, he enjoys life and at the same time is indifferent towards life. He makes the most of everything, but knows that there's not much to it.'

'Who will be his second? Or perhaps I should say, who's he going to bring along with him?'

'That was his main concern, once he'd recovered. He named two or three of the local gentry, but then dropped them, they were too old or too pious, he said, he'd send a telegram to his friend Buddenbrook in Treptow. And he came, a capital fellow, dashing and yet like a child. He couldn't calm down and strode to and fro, very agitated. But when I'd told him everything, he said just the same as we did, "You're right, it has to be." '

The coffee came. They had a cigar, and once more Wüllersdorf's aim was to direct the conversation on to less immediate topics.

'I'm surprised none of the Kessiners has come to greet you. I know you were very popular. And your friend Gieshübler, of all people …'

Innstetten smiled. 'You don't understand the people here on the coast; half of them are dull burghers, half of them sly dogs, not very much to my taste; but there's one virtue they have in common, they're all very well mannered. Especially dear old Gieshübler. Naturally everyone knows what it's about, but for that very reason they refrain from showing their curiosity.'

At that moment a chaise with its hood down appeared on the left, and, as it was before the arranged time,

approached slowly.

'Is that ours?' Innstetten asked.

'I imagine so.'

Then the carriage stopped outside the hotel, and Innstetten and Wüllersdorf stood up.

Wüllersdorf went to the coachman and said, 'To the breakwater.'

The breakwater was on the opposite side of the beach, to the right, not the left, and the wrong instruction was simply given in order to avoid any incidents, which were, of course, a possibility. Anyway, whether they intended to keep to the right or the left farther out of the town, they would still have to drive through the Plantation, and that would inevitably take them past Innstetten's old house. It was quieter than it had been; the ground-floor rooms looked rather neglected, so what would it be like upstairs! And now Innstetten himself was overcome with the eerie feeling he had so often combated or smiled at in Effi, and he was glad when they were past it.

'That's where I used to live,' he said to Wüllersdorf.

'It looks odd, rather deserted and abandoned.'

'Could well be. In the town it was said to be a haunted house, and the way it looks now, I can't say the people are wrong.'

'What was it all about?'

'Oh, some stupid nonsense: an old sea captain with a granddaughter or niece who disappeared one day, and a Chinaman who was perhaps her lover, and in the hall a little shark and a crocodile, both hanging on strings and always moving. A wonderful story to tell, but not now. I've got all kinds of other things going through my mind.'

'You're forgetting that everything can go well.'

'It won't be allowed to. And before, Wüllersdorf, when you were talking about Crampas, you were taking a quite different line yourself.'

Soon after that they were through the Plantation, and the coachman was about to turn right, to the breakwater. 'Turn left instead, we can leave the breakwater until later.' And the coachman turned left on to a wide highway heading behind the men's bathing beach straight towards the woods. When they were three hundred yards away Wüllersdorf got the coachman to stop, and the two of them walked, on crunching sand, along a fairly wide road that cut straight through the three rows of dunes. Everywhere alongside it were thick clumps of marram grass, with immortelles and a few blood-red carnations around them. Innstetten bent down and put one of the carnations in his buttonhole. 'The immortelles afterwards.'

They walked for five minutes. When they reached the fairly deep hollow between the two last dunes they saw the opposing party already there, on the left: Crampas and Buddenbrook and dear Dr Hannemann, holding his hat in his hand so that his hair was streaming in the wind.

Innstetten and Wüllersdorf went up the sandy defile, Buddenbrook came to meet them, they shook hands, and the two seconds went to one side for a short discussion on the arrangements. The result was that they should advance together and fire at ten paces. Then Buddenbrook returned to his place. It all went very quickly and the shots rang out. Crampas fell.

Innstetten took a few paces back and turned away from the scene. Wüllersdorf, however, had gone over to Buddenbrook, and the two of them waited for the doctor to speak, but he just shrugged his shoulders. At the same time Crampas waved his hand to indicate that he wanted to say something. Wüllersdorf bent down to him, nodded in agreement at the few, almost inaudible words from the dying man's lips, and went over to Innstetten.

'Crampas wants to speak to you, Innstetten. You have to comply with his request. He has three minutes to live at the most.'

Innstetten went over to Crampas.

'Will you …' They were his last words.

A look of pain, and yet almost of acquiescence, crossed his face, and then it was over.

Chapter 29

Innstetten was back in Berlin on the evening of the same day. He had driven straight to the railway station in the carriage he'd left at the crossroads in the dunes, without going through Kessin again and leaving it to the two seconds to report the matter to the authorities. During the journey (he had a compartment to himself) he mused over the events of the day, thinking everything through again; his thoughts were the same as two days previously, except that they proceeded in the opposite direction, starting with the conviction of his right and his duty and ending with doubts about it. 'Guilt, if it's anything at all, is not bound to time and place and cannot be wiped away from one day to the next. Guilt demands expiation, that makes sense. But a time limitation is neither fish nor flesh, it's feeble, or at best just banal.' And he took heart from this and told himself again that it had happened the way it had to happen. But even as he came to this conclusion, he rebutted it. 'There *must* be a time limit, a time limit is the only sensible way; whether that means it's banal as well doesn't matter; sensible things usually are banal. I'm forty-five now. If I'd found the letters twenty-five years later, I'd be seventy. Then Wüllersdorf would have said, "Don't be a fool, Innstetten." And if Wüllersdorf hadn't said it, Buddenbrook would have, and even if he hadn't, I would have done so myself. So much is clear. If you go to extremes, you go too far and just look ridiculous. No doubt about that. But where does it start? Where is the boundary? Ten years still requires a duel, and it's a matter of honour, and after eleven years, or even ten-and-a-half, it's a piece of nonsense. The limit, the limit. Where does it lie? Was it there? Had it already been crossed? When I see that last look of his again, resigned and yet a smile in his misery, it was a look that said, "Innstetten, still the stickler for principle … you could have spared me all that, and yourself." And perhaps he was right. There's something like that at the back of my mind. Now if I'd been full of murderous hatred, if there had been a desire for revenge deep in my heart … Vengeance is ugly, but there's something human about it, a natural human right. But then it was all just for the sake of an idea, an abstract concept, a made-up piece of business, almost play-acting. And I have to continue play-acting and send Effi away and ruin her life and mine too … I should have burnt the letters and never let the world outside know about them. And then when she came back, all unsuspecting, I should have said to her, "There is your place," and I should have separated from her inwardly. Not in full view of the outside world. There are so many lives that aren't real lives and so many marriages that aren't real marriages … then my happiness would have gone, but I wouldn't be haunted by his eye with its questioning look and its mute accusation.'

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Shortly before ten Innstetten's carriage stopped outside his apartment. He went up the steps and rang the bell. Johanna came and opened the door.

'How's Annie?'

'Fine, sir. She's not asleep yet. If you would …'

'No, no, that will just excite her. I'd rather see her in the morning. Bring me a glass of tea, Johanna. Has anyone been?'

'Only the doctor.'

Now Innstetten was alone again. He walked up and down as he liked to do. 'They'll know everything already. Roswitha's stupid, but Johanna's a clever woman. And even if they don't know for sure, they'll have worked it out and know anyway. It's strange how many things can become a sign and give away matters, as if everyone had been there.'

Johanna brought his tea. Innstetten drank it. After all the exertion he was dead tired and fell asleep.

*

Innstetten got up early. He saw Annie, had a few words with her, praised her for being a good patient, and then went to the Ministry to report to his Minister everything that had happened. The Minister was very gracious. 'Yes, Innstetten, fortunate the man who can come out of everything life throws at us unscathed; you've been badly hit.' He was happy with everything that had been done, and left any further arrangements to Innstetten.

It was late in the afternoon when Innstetten got home, and he found a note from Wüllersdorf there.

'Back this morning. Seen a whole host of things; painful, touching, Gieshübler above all. The most delightful hunchback I've ever seen. He didn't say much about you, but your wife, your wife! He just couldn't calm down, and eventually the little fellow broke into tears. The things that be! It would be desirable if there were more Gieshüblers. But there are more of the other kind. And then the scene in the Major's house … terrible. Not a word about that. We've been taught a lesson again: watch out. I'll see you tomorrow. W.'

Innstetten was devastated when he read that. He sat down and wrote a few letters of his own. When he'd

finished he rang. ‘Post the letters, Johanna.’

Johanna took the letters, and was about to leave.

‘… And one other thing, Johanna. Your mistress isn’t coming back. You’ll find out why from other people. Annie mustn’t know anything, at least not now. The poor child. You must gradually get her to understand that she hasn’t got a mother any more. I can’t do it. But be careful how you go about it. And don’t let Roswitha spoil everything.’

Johanna stood there for a moment, dazed. Then she went to Innstetten and kissed his hand.

When she was back in the kitchen she was filled with pride and a sense of superiority, indeed, almost with happiness as well. The Master had not only told her everything but added at the end, ‘And don’t let Roswitha spoil everything.’ That was the most important thing, and although she was not without a kind heart and even sympathy for his wife, most important of all for her was the triumph of a certain intimacy vis-à-vis the Master.

Under normal circumstances it would have been easy to flaunt her triumph, but on that day it was unfortunate for her that her rival, despite not having been taken into the Master’s confidence, should turn out to be better informed. The porter downstairs had called Roswitha into his little lodge and immediately handed her the page of a newspaper to read. ‘There’s something for you, Roswitha; you can bring it back to me later on. It’s just the *Fremdemblatt*, but Lene’s gone out to get *Kleines Journal*. I presume there’ll be more in that, they always know everything. But who would’ve thought it, Roswitha?’

After this Roswitha, who was in general not very curious, had gone up the backstairs as quickly as possible and had just finished reading the article when Johanna came. She put the letters Innstetten had given her on the table, glanced at the addresses, or pretended to (for she knew well who they were for), and said with feigned calm, ‘One’s to Hohen-Cremmen.’

‘I can imagine,’ Roswitha said.

Johanna was more than a little surprised at this. ‘Usually the Master never writes to Hohen-Cremmen.’

‘Yes, usually. But now … Just imagine, the porter downstairs gave me *this* only a few minutes ago.’

Johanna took the newspaper and read out in a low voice the place that had been marked with a thick line of ink: ‘As we learnt from a well-informed source shortly before going to press, yesterday morning in the seaside resort of Kessin there was a duel between Ministerialrat v. I. (Keithstrasse) and Major von Crampas. Major von Crampas fell. There are said to have been relations between him and the Frau Ministerialrätin, a beautiful and still very young woman.’

‘The things these papers write,’ Johanna said, put out at seeing her news superseded.

‘Yes,’ Roswitha said. ‘And now people will read this and say nasty things about my poor, dear Mistress. And the poor Major. Now he’s dead.’

‘What are you thinking of, Roswitha? Should he *not* be dead? Or should it be the Master who’s dead?’

‘No, Johanna, our Master should be alive as well, they should all be alive. I’m not in favour of shooting people dead, I can’t even stand the bang. But just think, Johanna, that was all ages ago, and the letters—I thought they looked odd right away, with the red string wrapped round them three or four times and then knotted without a bow—they looked quite yellow, it was so long ago. We’ve been here over six years now, it’s such an old business, how could they … ?’

‘Oh, Roswitha, you don’t understand how these things are. And when you think about it, it was your fault. It’s the letters that set it off. Why did you get the chisel and break the sewing-table open? That’s something you should never do, open something someone else has locked.’

‘That really is too bad of you, Johanna, to say it’s my fault like that, when you know that it was *your* fault, that you came bursting into the kitchen as if you were going out of your mind and told me the sewing-table had to be opened, the bandage was in there, so then I came with the chisel and now it’s supposed to be my fault. No, I say …’

‘All right, I didn’t mean it, Roswitha. But you shouldn’t come and say “the poor Major”. What d’you mean, the poor Major? Your poor Major wasn’t worth a fig; anyone who has a red moustache like that and is always twirling it is worthless and does nothing but cause trouble. When you’ve always had positions in the best houses … but you haven’t, Roswitha, that’s what you lack … then you know what’s right and proper and what honour is, and you also know that when something like this happens there’s no other way to it, you get what they call a challenge and one of them’s shot dead.’

‘I know that too; I’m not as stupid as you’re always trying to make out. But when it was so long ago …’

‘Yes, Roswitha, you and your never-ending “so long ago”; that’s what shows that you know nothing about it. You’re always telling us the story of your father with the red-hot iron rod and how he came after you with it, and whenever I put a red-hot heating iron in, it really does always make me think of your father, and I can see him trying to kill you because of the child that’s dead now. Yes, Roswitha, you’re always talking about that, and all we need now is for you to tell little Annie the story, and once she’s confirmed then she’s sure to hear it, perhaps on the very same day. And it annoys me that you’ve been through all that, when your father was just a village blacksmith who shoed horses or put a tyre on a wheel, and now you come along and expect the Master to accept all that just because it was so long ago. What is long ago? Six years isn’t long ago. And the Mistress—she isn’t coming back, by the way, the Master’s just told me—will be just twenty-six on her next birthday, that’s in August, and you’re trying to tell me it’s “a long time ago”. And even if she were thirty-six, and I can tell you,

at thirty-six you really have to watch out, and the Master had done nothing, then the grand folk would have "cut" him. But that's a word you don't know, Roswitha, you know nothing about it.'

'No, I know nothing about that, and I don't want to. But there is one thing I do know, Johanna, and that's that you're in love with the Master.'

Johanna gave a forced laugh.

'Yes, go on, laugh. I've seen it for a long time. There's something about you. And it's a good job the Master doesn't have an eye for that kind of thing … The poor woman, the poor woman.'

Johanna was happy to make peace. 'Never mind, Roswitha. You've had one of your funny turns again, that's all, but all the people from the countryside get them.'

'You may be right there.'

'I'll take the post out now, and while I'm down there I'll see if the porter's got the other paper yet. You said Lene'd been sent out for it, didn't you? There must be more in it, there's next to nothing here.'

Chapter 30

Effi and Geheimrätin Zwicker had been almost three weeks in Ems, where they had the ground floor of a delightful little villa. Between their two living-rooms was a shared parlour with a view out into the garden; it also had a rosewood piano, on which Effi would play a sonata now and then, Frau Zwicker now and then a waltz; she was completely unmusical, her interest in the art being restricted to her passion for Niemann as Tannhäuser.*

It was a splendid morning; the birds were twittering in the little garden and, despite the early hour, the clack of billiard-balls could be heard from the building next door, in which there was a 'saloon'. The two ladies had taken their breakfast not in the parlour itself but on a little veranda, strewn with gravel and built up a few feet above the garden, to which three steps led down; the awning had been rolled up to allow them full access to the fresh air, and both Effi and Frau Zwicker were busy at their needlework. Just now and then they exchanged a few words.

'I can't understand', Effi said, 'why I haven't had a letter for four days now; he usually writes every day. I wonder if Annie's ill? Or he is?'

Frau Zwicker smiled. 'You'll see that he's in good health, my friend, in perfectly good health.'

Effi found the tone in which this was said distasteful and seemed about to reply, but at that moment the housemaid came out onto the terrace to clear the breakfast table. She was called Afra, came from Bonn, and was accustomed to measure all the manifold phenomena of life against Bonn students and Bonn hussars.

'Afra,' Effi said, 'it must be nine by now; hasn't the postman been yet?'

'No, not yet, Madam.'

'What's the problem?'

'The postman, of course. He's from the country out by Siegen and just has no dash. I've told him before, it's nothing but sloppiness. And have you seen his hair? I think he's no idea what a parting is.'

'You're being too severe again, Afra. Just think: delivering mail, day in, day out, in this heat …'

'Right enough, Ma'am. But there are others who can do it; when they've got what it takes, they can manage it.' And while she was still talking she went down the steps, balancing the tray on the tips of her five fingers, to take the shorter route through the garden to the kitchen.

'A pretty woman,' Frau Zwicker said. 'So nimble and lively, I'd almost say with natural grace. Do you know, my dear Baronin, that this Afra … a wonderful name, by the way, there's even supposed to have been a St Afra, though I don't think ours is descended from her …'

'You're going off at a tangent again, my dear Geheimrätin. This time it's called Afra and it's made you forget what you were actually going to say …'

'No it hasn't, my dear, or at least I'll find my way back there again. I was going to say that this Afra reminds me very much of the well-built young woman I saw in your house …'

'Yes, you're right, there is a similarity. Only our housemaid in Berlin is much prettier, in particular she has much more beautiful and fuller hair. I've never seen such beautiful flaxen hair as our Johanna has. You see a bit of it now and then, but never so full …'

Frau Zwicker smiled. 'It's truly rare to hear a young woman speak with such enthusiasm of her housemaid's flaxen hair. And especially of its fullness. Do you know, I find that touching. Choosing a maid is a constant problem. They should be pretty, since any visitor, especially male, is put off at seeing a beanpole with a coarse complexion and dirty fingernails when the door's opened; it's a good thing that corridors are mostly quite dark. But then, if you pay too much attention to making the right first impression and even give a pretty woman like that one little lacy apron after another, then you can't rest easy any longer and, if you're not *too* vain and don't have *too* much self-confidence, you start to wonder whether you shouldn't find some redress for the situation. "Redress" was one of Zwicker's favourite words, he often used to bore me with it; but then he was a senior civil servant, and they all have favourite words like that.'

Effi listened to this with mixed feelings. Had the Geheimrätin been slightly different she could have found all this charming, but being the way she was, Effi's reaction to something that would otherwise perhaps simply have amused her was one of distaste.

'What you say about senior civil servants is right, my dear. Innstetten's got into that habit too, and always laughs when I give him a look and then apologizes for the official jargon. Of course, your husband had been in the civil service longer and was presumably older …'

'A little,' Frau Zwicker said tartly.

'And all in all, I cannot understand the kind of fears you are expressing. What people call the proprieties are surely still in force …'

'You think so?'

'The fact is, I cannot imagine that you of all people, my dear, should suffer such worries and fears. You have

—forgive me for being so open about this—precisely what men call “charm”. You are merry, captivating, stimulating, and, if it’s not being indiscreet, given all those qualities, I would like to ask whether what you say is derived from painful experiences you have had yourself?’

‘Painful experiences?’ Frau Zwicker said. ‘Oh, my dear Frau Baronin, “painful experiences”, that really is going too far, even if one has actually been through certain things oneself. “Painful” is simply too much, far too much. And then, one has one’s own stratagems and countermeasures. You mustn’t take that kind of thing to heart.’

‘I can’t form a clear idea of what you’re suggesting. It’s not that I don’t know what sin is, I do know that; but surely there’s a difference whether you start indulging in all kinds of bad thoughts or whether such things become an occasional or even a regular habit. And then, in your own home …’

‘That’s not what I’m talking about, that wasn’t what I was saying, although, to be honest, I do have my suspicions in that respect as well or, as I must now say, had; for that’s all in the past. But there are outside areas. Have you heard of country outings?’

‘Of course. And I wish Innstetten were more of a mind to enjoy them …’

‘Think carefully about that, my dear. Zwicker was always going to Saatwinkel.* And I can tell you, when I hear that word it still hurts. All these places round our dear old city of Berlin where people go out to enjoy themselves! In fact the very names of these places are enough to fill you with fear and concern. You’re smiling. But you tell me, my dear, what can you expect of a big city and its morals, when right at its gates (for there’s no real difference between Berlin and Charlottenburg any more) there’s a Pichelsberg, a Pichelsdorf, and a Pichelswerder—three villages happy to include a word for ‘booze’ in their name within a thousand yards of each other? You can go round the whole world and not find anything like it anywhere.’

Effi nodded.

‘And all of that’, Frau Zwicker went on, ‘happens under the greenwood tree on the banks of the Havel. That’s all in the west, where you have culture and civilized behaviour. But now go to the other side, my dear Frau Baronin, up the Spree. I’m not talking of Treptow and Stralau, they’re mere trifles, harmless, but if you have a look at the large-scale map you will find, beside names that are at least strange, such as Kiekebusch and Wuhlheide—you should have heard how Zwicker pronounced that word—names that are downright brutal, but I won’t insult you by mentioning them. But of course, those are the places people prefer. I hate these country outings that are popularly seen as a trip in an open charabanc singing “A Prussian I am”, but that in fact contain the seeds of a social revolution. And when I say a “social revolution”, I naturally mean a moral revolution, everything else is already a thing of the past, as Zwicker said to me during his last days, “Believe me, Sophie, Saturn devours his own children.”* And Zwicker, whatever faults and weaknesses he may have had, was of a philosophical turn of mind and had a sense of historical development, I have to give him that … But I can see that my dear Frau von Innstetten, however polite she generally may be, is only half-listening; of course, the postman has put in an appearance over there and her heart flies across to him, anticipating the words of love that are in the letter … Now then, Böselager, what have you got for us?’

By now the postman had reached the table and handed them the post: several newspapers, two advertisements from hairdressers, and, last of all, a large registered letter to Frau Baronin von Innstetten, née von Briest.

She signed for it and the postman left. Frau Zwicker glanced at the hairdresser’s advertisements and laughed at the price-reduction for a shampoo.

Effi wasn’t listening. She twisted and turned the letter she’d received and felt strangely reluctant to open it. Registered and sealed with two large seals, and a strong envelope. What could it mean? Postmarked ‘Hohen-Cremmen’ and addressed in her mother’s handwriting. The fifth day without a word from Innstetten.

She took a pair of embroidery scissors with mother-of-pearl handles and slowly cut open the envelope. And now there was another surprise in store for her. The sheet of paper, yes, that was a closely written letter from her mother, but wrapped up in it were banknotes, with a strip of paper round them on which the amount enclosed was written in red pencil and in her father’s hand. She put the bundle back in the envelope and started to read, leaning back in the rocking-chair. But she didn’t get very far, the letter dropped from her fingers, and her face went pale. Then she bent down and picked it up again.

‘What’s the matter, my dear? Bad news?’

Effi nodded but said no more, just asked if she would give her a glass of water. When she’d drunk it, she said, ‘It’ll pass, my dear Geheimrätin, but I’d like to retire for a moment … If you could send Afra to me.’

And she stood up and went back into the parlour, where she was clearly glad to find something to hold on to and felt her way along the rosewood piano. She reached her room, that was on the right, and, after groping and searching, managed to open the door and get to the bed against the wall, where she collapsed, unconscious.

Chapter 31

Minutes passed. When Effi had recovered, she sat down on a chair by the window and looked out at the quiet street. If only there'd been some noise and arguing; but there was just the sunshine on the macadamized surface of the road and the shadows thrown by the railings and the trees. She was overwhelmed by a feeling of being alone in the world. Only an hour ago a happy wife, the favourite of everyone who knew her, and now cast out. She had only read the opening of the letter, but it was enough to make her situation clear. Where could she go? She had no answer to that, yet she was filled with longing to get away from everything around her, that is, away from this Geheimrätin, for whom all of this was just an 'interesting case' and whose sympathy, if it existed, would certainly not reach the level of her curiosity.

'Where can I go?'

The letter lay before her on the table, but she didn't have the courage to read on. Finally she said, 'What am I still afraid of? What else can be said that I haven't already said to myself? The man for whose sake all this happened is dead, there's no possibility of a return home, in a few weeks the divorce will be granted and the father will be given custody of the child. Of course. I am guilty, and a guilty woman can't bring up her child. And what with, anyway? I'll presumably be able to manage for myself. I'll see what Mama has to say about that.'

With that she picked up the letter to read the rest.

' … and now to your future, my dear Effi. You will have to fend for yourself and, as far as finance is concerned, you can rely on our support. It will be best if you live in Berlin (that kind of thing is easiest to conceal in a large city), where you will be one of the many whose actions have deprived them of open air and bright sunshine. You will lead a lonely life, and if you don't want to, then you will probably have to go down the social ladder. The world in which you have lived will be closed to you. And what is the saddest part for us and for you (for you too, from what we believe we know about you), your parental home will also be closed to you; we cannot offer you a quiet corner in Hohen-Cremmen, a refuge in our house, for that would mean shutting the house off from all the world, and we are definitely not inclined to do that. Not because we are too much attached to the world and would find saying farewell to what is called "society" absolutely unbearable; no, not because of that, but simply because we must nail our colours to the mast and show to all the world—I'm afraid I can't avoid the word—our condemnation of what you did, you, our only and much-loved child …'

Effi couldn't read any more; her eyes filled with tears, and after she had struggled in vain to hold them back, her heart overflowed as she finally burst out sobbing and crying.

*

Half an hour later there was a knock at the door, and at Effi's 'Come in,' the Geheimrätin appeared.

'May I come in?'

'Of course, my dear,' Effi said. She was now lying on the sofa, hands clasped and with a light blanket over her. 'I'm exhausted, and I've made myself as comfortable as I could. May I ask you to get a chair for yourself?'

Frau Zwicker sat so that the table with a bowl of flowers on it was between Effi and herself. Effi showed no trace of embarrassment and didn't change her position at all, not even her clasped hands. All at once she couldn't care less what the woman thought; she just wanted to get away.

'You have received some sad news, my dear Frau Baronin …'

'More than sad,' Effi said. 'At least, sad enough to require a rapid end to our journey together. I have to leave today.'

'I don't want to seem intrusive, but is it something to do with Annie?'

'No, not with Annie. The news didn't come from Berlin, the letter was from my Mama. She's worried about me and I feel I need to reassure her, or at least to be there with her.'

'I find that only too understandable, however much I regret having to spend these last days in Ems without you. May I offer you any assistance I can give?'

Before Effi could answer, Afra came in and announced that the guests were gathering for lunch. The ladies and gentlemen were very excited, she said. The Emperor was coming for three weeks, and at the end there would be a large-scale military exercise and the Bonn Hussars were coming too.

Frau Zwicker immediately considered whether it would be worth staying until then, came to a definite 'yes', then went to apologize for Effi's absence at lunch.

When, after she'd gone, Afra was about to leave as well, Effi said, 'And then, Afra, when you're free, would you come for a quarter of an hour to help me pack? I'm leaving by the seven o'clock train this evening.'

'Today? Oh, that is a pity, Madam. The good times are just starting now.'

Effi smiled.

*

It was only with difficulty that Frau Zwicker, who hoped to hear some juicy titbits, was persuaded not to accompany the ‘Frau Baronin’ to the station. One always got so distracted at a station, Effi had assured her, all one could think about was one’s seat and one’s luggage; she particularly liked to say farewell to people she was fond of beforehand. Frau Zwicker expressed agreement with that, even though she clearly sensed it was just a pretext; she had spent her life listening at doors, and could immediately distinguish what was genuine from what wasn’t.

Afra accompanied Effi to the station and made the Frau Baronin give a firm promise that she would return next summer; anyone who’d been to Ems always came back. Ems was the best place of all, apart from Bonn.

In the meantime Frau Zwicker had sat down to write some letters; not on the rather wobbly rococo writing-desk in the parlour, but outside on the veranda, at the same table where she’d breakfasted with Effi hardly ten hours ago.

She was looking forward to writing the letter, that was to be for the benefit of a friend of hers from Berlin, a lady who was staying in Reichenhall at the moment. Their two minds had long been as one in the profound scepticism with which they regarded the male of the species; they agreed that men fell far short of what could legitimately be expected of them, most of all the so-called ‘dashing’ ones. ‘Those who are so embarrassed they don’t know where to look are still, after a brief preliminary course of instruction, the best, but the real Don Juans always turn out to be a disappointment.’ This was the kind of wisdom the two friends exchanged.

Frau Zwicker was already on her second page, and continued to pursue her more than rewarding subject, which of course was ‘Effi’, as follows:

‘All in all, I liked her very much, charming, apparently open, completely free from aristocratic arrogance (or very good at concealing it), and always interested when she was being told something interesting, of which, as I have no need to assure you, I made full use. To recap, then: a delightful young woman, twenty-five, or not much more. But I still have my suspicions, especially at this moment, yes, perhaps now most of all. The business with the letter today—there’s a real story behind it. I’m as good as certain of that. It would be the first time I’ve been wrong in such a matter. The way she liked talking about the fashionable Berlin preachers so much and measured the degree of piety of each one, that and her occasional look of innocence, each time assuring us butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth—all these things confirmed me in my … But there’s our Afra coming, I think I told you about her, a pretty girl, and she’s put a newspaper on the table that, she says, our landlady gave her to bring to me; the article marked with a blue pencil. Forgive me if I read it first …

PS. The newspaper was pretty interesting and came just at the right moment. I’ll cut out the marked passage and put it in with this letter. When you’ve read it, you’ll see I wasn’t wrong. Who can this Crampas be? It’s incredible—to write notes and letters yourself in the first place, and then to keep the man’s letters! Why do we have stoves and fires? Such things should never happen as long as this nonsense with duels continues; future generations will perhaps be free to indulge in this passion for writing letters, if it no longer presents a danger. But we’re nowhere near that at the moment. I have to say, I have great sympathy with the young Frau Baronin and, vain as one is, my only comfort is that I wasn’t mistaken about the matter. And it wasn’t such a straightforward case. A less gifted diagnostician would perhaps have allowed the wool to be pulled over her eyes.

Yours as ever
Sophie.’

Chapter 32

Three years had passed, and for almost all of that time Effi had lived in a small apartment in Königgrätzerstrasse,* between Askanischer Platz and Hallesches Tor; one front room and one back room, with a kitchen and maid's bedroom behind it, all as average and ordinary as possible. And yet it was a distinctively nice apartment that struck everyone who saw it as pleasant, most of all, perhaps, old Geheimrat Rummschüttel, who dropped in now and then, and had long since forgiven the poor young woman her play-acting with rheumatics and neuralgia, and everything else that had happened since then, that is, if any forgiveness were necessary on his part. For Rummschüttel had come across much worse. He was now in his late seventies, but whenever Effi, who had been in poor health for some time, sent a letter asking him to call, he would be there next morning and wave away her apologies because the apartment was so high up. 'No need to apologize, my dear Frau von Innstetten; in the first place it's my job, and in the second I'm happy and almost proud that I can still manage the stairs so well. If I weren't afraid I'd be a nuisance—for I come as a doctor and not as an enthusiastic admirer of nature and landscapes—I would probably call more often, just to see you and to spend a few minutes sitting at your back window. I think you don't appreciate the view enough.'

'But I do, I do,' Effi said. However, Rummschüttel took no notice of that and went on, 'Please, dear lady, come over here to the window, just for a moment, or allow me to give you my arm. Really splendid again today. Look at all the railway embankments, three, no, four, and the constant gliding to and fro … and now the train's disappearing again behind a cluster of trees. Really splendid. And the sun shining through the white smoke! If it weren't for St Matthew's churchyard right behind it, it would be perfect.'

'I like to see churchyards.'

'Yes, you can say that. But we doctors? We doctors are always faced with the inevitable question: could there not perhaps be one or two fewer buried here? Otherwise, my dear Frau Baronin, I'm happy with you, and my only complaint is that you won't hear of Ems; with your tendency to catarrh, Ems would work …'

Effi remained silent.

'Ems would work wonders. But since you won't hear of it (and I can accept that), then take the waters here. You can be in the garden of Prince Albrecht's Palace* in three minutes, and though it lacks the bands and the elegant outfits and all the usual diversions of a regular promenade at a watering-place, it's the waters that are the main point.'

Effi agreed and Rummschüttel took his hat and stick. But he went back to the window again. 'I hear they're going to terrace the Kreuzberg.* God bless the City Council, and once that bare patch has more green on it … A delightful apartment. I could almost envy you … Oh, and there's one thing I've been meaning to say for a long time, my dear lady, you always write me such a charming letter. Well, who wouldn't be delighted to receive one of those? But it takes an effort every time … Just send Roswitha round.'

Effi thanked him, and they parted.

*

'Just send Roswitha round …' Rummschüttel had said. Was Roswitha with Effi? Was she in Königgrätzerstrasse and not in Keithstrasse? She certainly was, and had been there for a long time, for just as long as Effi herself had been living in Königgrätzerstrasse. Three days before she moved in Roswitha had come to see her beloved mistress, and that had been a big day for both. So much so that it must be examined in retrospect.

When her parents' letter had arrived telling her she couldn't return to Hohen-Cremmen, and she had gone back to Berlin on the evening train, Effi had not looked immediately for an apartment of her own but tried rooms in a boarding-house. And it had been reasonably successful. The two ladies who ran the boarding-house were well educated and considerate, and had long since given up being inquisitive. They had so many people under their roof that any attempt to find out the secrets of each individual would have been much too time-consuming. That kind of thing was bad for business. Effi, still remembering Frau Zwicker's gimlet-eyed cross-examinations, was very pleased at the restraint shown by the two ladies; but after two weeks she felt that the overall atmosphere, both physical and psychological, was not bearable. There were mostly seven of them at table, and they were, apart from Effi and one of the ladies in charge of the boarding-house, two English girls who were studying at the Academy, a titled lady from Saxony, a very pretty Jewish woman from Galicia, of whom no one knew what she was doing in Berlin, and the daughter of a church organist from Polzin in Pomerania, who wanted to be a painter. That was an unfortunate combination, and the reciprocal assertions of superiority, in which, strangely enough, the two English girls did not rule the roost but had to compete with the girl from Polzin, full of her sense of being an artist, were tedious. Yet Effi, who kept aside from all this, might have been able to tolerate such an atmosphere, had it not been for the additional physical burden of the guest-house air. What the component parts of this were was perhaps beyond definition, but what was only too certain was that it made it difficult for Effi, who was very delicate, to breathe properly, and so for that reason she was

very soon forced to look for other accommodation, which she then found in the same area. This was the apartment already described, in Königgrätzerstrasse. She was to move in at the beginning of the autumn quarter, had already acquired what was needed, and during the last days of September was counting the hours until her release from the boarding-house.

On one of these last days—she had withdrawn from the dining-room a quarter of an hour previously with the intention of having a rest on a sea-grass sofa upholstered in a woollen fabric with a pattern of large flowers—when there was a quiet knock at her door.

'Come in.'

One of the housemaids, a sickly-looking woman in her mid-thirties, who, from constantly standing around in the corridors, carried the atmosphere pervading them everywhere in the folds of her dress, came in and said, 'Excuse me, Madam, but there's someone wants to speak to you.'

'Who?'

'A woman.'

'And did she give a name?'

'Yes, Roswitha.'

And, lo and behold, hardly had Effi heard the name than she shook off her sleepiness and jumped up and went out into the corridor to grasp Roswitha with both hands and pull her into her room.

'Roswitha. You. What joy! What have you got for me? Something good, I'm sure. Such a dear old face can only bring good things. Oh, I'm so happy, I could give you a kiss; I'd never have thought I could feel such joy again. How are you, my dear old friend? Do you remember the time when the ghost of the Chinaman haunted the house? Those were happy days. At the time I thought they were unhappy, but that was before I knew how hard life can be. Since then I've found that out. Oh, a ghost is far from being the worst thing. Come, dear Roswitha, come and sit down here with me and tell me … Oh, I feel such longing. What's Annie doing?'

Roswitha could hardly speak, and stared round the strange room with the grey walls, that looked as if they were dusty and were framed with thin gold mouldings. Finally, however, she found her tongue and said that the Master was now back from Glatz;* the old Emperor had said that six weeks' confinement in a fortress was enough in a case like that, and she'd been waiting until the day when the Master would be back because of Annie, who needed someone to keep an eye on her. Johanna was a decent woman, but she was too pretty and too preoccupied with herself and perhaps had God-knows-what kind of ideas. But now that the Master could look after her again and see to things, she'd thought she'd make the effort to go and see how the Mistress was doing …

'Quite right too, Roswitha …'

… and see if there was anything she lacked and whether she perhaps needed her; if that were so, she'd just stay there and help her and do everything and see to it that the Mistress was properly looked after again.

Effi had leant back in the corner of the sofa and closed her eyes. But all at once she sat up and said, 'Yes, Roswitha, what you say there is an idea, a good idea. I should tell you that I'm not going to stay here in this boarding-house, I've leased an apartment and furnished it and I'm moving in in three days' time. And if I could go there and say to you, "No, Roswitha, not here, the wardrobe should be over there and the mirror here," yes, that would be something, I'd like that. And when we're tired from all the toil, I'd say, "Now, Roswitha, go across and get us a jug of Spatenbräu, for when you've been working hard you need a drink, and if you can, bring us something good from the Habsburger Hof as well, you can always take the dishes back afterwards …" Yes, Roswitha, when I think of that, it's as if a weight were lifted from my heart. But I have to ask you, have you thought all this through? I'm not talking about Annie, though I know how fond of her you are, almost as if she were your own child—but still, Annie will be taken care of, and Johanna's fond of her too. No, it's not that. But just think how everything has changed, if you want to come back to me. I'm not the way I was; I've taken a very small apartment, and the porter will probably not do as much for me and you. And you'll have a very small household to cook for, always like what we used to call our Thursday meal, because that was the day the cleaning was done. Do you remember? And do you remember when Gieshübler came and had to join us at table and said he'd never tasted anything so delicious? Surely you remember, he was always so terribly polite, yet he was the only person in the town who knew something about food. The others all thought everything was nice.'

Roswitha was delighted at all this, and had assumed everything was going ahead when Effi repeated, 'Have you thought all this through? For many years—I have to say this, even though it was my own house—you've been spoilt, money didn't matter, we never had to economize. But now I do have to economize, for I'm poor and only have what I'm given, you know, from Hohen-Cremmen. My parents are very good to me, as far as they can be, but they're not rich. So now tell me, what do you think?'

'That I'll turn up with my case next Saturday, not in the evening but first thing in the morning, and that I'll be there when you start moving in. I can set to work in a way that you, Madam, can't.'

'Don't say that, Roswitha. I can do that as well. You can do anything, if you have to.'

'And then, Ma'am, you've no need to worry about me—as if I could think, "That's not good enough for Roswitha." Everything she has to share with Madam is good enough for Roswitha, especially if it's something sad. Yes, I'm really looking forward to that. Then you'll see that I know about that. And if I didn't, I'd learn soon enough. For I haven't forgotten when I was sitting in the churchyard, all alone in the world, thinking it would

be best if I were in the row of graves with all the others. Who was it who came along? Who kept me alive? Oh, I've been through so much. When my father came at me with the red-hot iron rod all those years ago …'

'Yes, I know, Roswitha …'

'Yes, that was bad enough. But when I was sitting there in the churchyard, so poor and abandoned, that was even worse. And then Madam came. May I never go to Heaven if I forget that.'

At that she stood up and went to the window. 'Look, Madam, you have to see *him* as well.'

Effi went over to her.

There, on the other side of the road, Rollo was sitting looking up at the guest-house windows.

*

A few days later Effi, aided by Roswitha, moved into her apartment in Königgrätzerstrasse, which she liked from the very beginning. She lacked company, of course, but during her time in the boarding-house she had derived so little pleasure from her association with other people that being alone didn't bother her, at least at the beginning. It was, of course, impossible to have a conversation about artistic matters with Roswitha, not even about what was in the newspaper; but if it concerned simple, human affairs and Effi started with an 'Oh, Roswitha, I feel frightened again …' the devoted soul always had a good answer ready, and comfort and, usually, advice.

Things went excellently until Christmas, but Christmas Eve was really sad, and when the new year arrived Effi started to grow quite melancholy. It wasn't cold, just grey and wet, and when the days were short that meant the evenings were all the longer. What could she do? She read, she did embroidery, she played patience, she played Chopin, but his nocturnes were not such as to bring light into her life, and when Roswitha came with the tea things and also put two little plates with an egg and a Wiener schnitzel cut up into little slices on the table, Effi would say, as she closed the piano, 'Come and take a seat, Roswitha. Keep me company.'

And Roswitha did. 'I can tell that Madam has been playing too much again; you always look like that then, and have red blotches on your face. Dr Rummschüttel forbade you to.'

'Oh, Roswitha, it's easy for Dr Rummschüttel to forbid something and it's easy for you to repeat it. But then what should I do? I can't spend all day sitting by the window, looking across at the Christuskirche. I always look at it on Sundays, during evening service, when the windows are lit up; but even that doesn't help, it always makes me feel even sadder at heart.'

'Well, Madam, then you ought to go in. You've been over there once.'

'Oh, several times. But I didn't get much out of it. He preaches quite well and he's a very clever man and I'd be happy if I knew a hundredth of what he knows. But it's all just as if I were reading a book; and then when he starts speaking very loud and waving his hands about and shaking his black locks, then that's the end of my devout mood.'

'The end?'

Effi laughed. 'You mean there wasn't even a beginning. And that will be the case. But whose fault is that? Not mine. He always talks so much about the Old Testament. And even if it's quite good, I don't find it at all uplifting. And all that listening anyway, it's not the right thing. Look, I really ought to have so much to do that I'm at my wits' end. That would be something for me. There are associations where young girls learn housekeeping, or sewing schools or kindergartens. Have you ever heard of things like that?'

'Yes, I have heard of them. Little Annie was to go to a kindergarten once.'

'There you see, you know better than I do. And I'd like to join such an association where you can make yourself useful. But there's no point even thinking about it; the ladies wouldn't accept me, and couldn't even if they wanted to. And that's the most terrible part of it, the world's so closed to you that you're even forbidden to help to do good. I can't even give poor children some private tuition …'

'That wouldn't be anything for you, Ma'am; the children are always wearing greasy boots and when it's wet—then there's so much smell and smoke, Madam wouldn't be able to stand it.'

Effi smiled. 'You're probably right there, Roswitha, but it's not a good thing that you're right, and it tells me that there's still too much of my old self in me and that life is still too good to me.'

But Roswitha would hear nothing of that. 'Life can never be too good for someone who's as good as Madam. And you shouldn't always play those sad things, and sometimes I think something will turn up and everything will be all right again.'

And something did turn up. Despite the church organist's daughter from Polzin, whose artist's arrogance she still recalled with horror, Effi decided to become a painter; and although she laughed at the idea herself, because she was well aware she would never be more than an amateur, she still pursued her goal passionately because it gave her an occupation and one that, being calm and quiet, was very much after her own heart. She enrolled with a teacher, who was very old and well versed in the Brandenburg aristocracy; at the same time he was so pious that he took a great liking to Effi from the very start: here, he presumably thought, was a soul to be saved, and so he treated her with particular kindness, as if she were his own daughter. Effi was delighted at this, and from the day of her first lesson her life took a turn for the better. Her empty life was no longer so empty, and Roswitha was jubilant that she had been right and something had turned up after all.

This went on for a year and more. But since she once more had contact with people that made her happy, it sparked off a desire for these contacts to be renewed and multiplied. At times she felt a passionate longing to go back to Hohen-Cremmen, and even more passionate was her longing to see Annie again. She was her child, after all, and when she pondered on that, at the same time recalling what Marietta Trippelli had once said—'the world is so small, you could be sure of suddenly meeting an old acquaintance in the middle of Africa'—she was quite rightly surprised she had never run into Annie. But that was about to change. Coming home from her painting lesson close by the Zoo, she got onto a horse-drawn tram going down the long Kurfürstenstrasse. It was very hot, and the curtains, that had been let down and were billowing in the strong draught, did her good. She leant back in the corner facing the front platform, and was scrutinizing several sofas, blue with tassels, etched on a pane of glass, when—the tram happened to be going very slowly—she saw three schoolgirls, satchels on their backs and wearing little pointed hats, jump on, two blond and high-spirited, the third dark and serious. It was Annie. It gave Effi a shock. A meeting with her daughter, which she had so long desired, now filled her with consternation. What should she do? Quickly making up her mind, she opened the door on to the front platform, where there was no one but the driver, and asked him to let her get off from there at the next stop. 'It's forbidden, Miss,' the driver said, but she gave him the coin with such a pleading look that the good-natured fellow changed his mind and muttered to himself, 'She shouldn't really, but once won't hurt.' When the tram had stopped, he opened the railing and Effi jumped off.

She was still very agitated when she got home.

'Just imagine, Roswitha, I've seen Annie!' And she told her about the encounter in the horse-drawn tram. Roswitha was unhappy that mother and daughter had not had an emotional reunion, and it took a long time to convince her that had been out of the question in the presence of so many people. Then Effi had to tell her what Annie looked like, and when, with maternal pride, she had done that, Roswitha said, 'Yes, she's half and half. She gets her pretty looks and, if I may put it that way, her distinctive nature from her Mama; but her serious side, in that she's quite her Papa. And when I think about it, she's probably more like the Master.'

'Thank God,' Effi said.

'Well, that is the question, Ma'am. And I'm sure there are some who'll be more for her Mama.'

'You think so, Roswitha? I don't.'

'Oh come now, I'm not that easily fooled, and I think Madam knows very well the way things are and what men like best.'

'Oh, don't start on about that, Roswitha.'

With that the conversation broke off and wasn't taken up again. But although Effi avoided talking about Annie with Roswitha, she couldn't get over her encounter with her, and was distressed at the idea that she had run away from her own daughter. It tormented her so much she felt ashamed, and her desire to see Annie reached almost morbid proportions. To write to Innstetten and ask permission to do so was impossible. She was well aware of her guilt, indeed, she nurtured the feeling with an almost passionate zeal; but, on the other hand, for all her sense of guilt she felt a certain revolt against Innstetten. She told herself he was right, but however right he was, ultimately he was wrong. Everything that had happened was so far in the past, a new life had begun—he could have let it die away, instead it was poor Crampas who'd had to die.

No, writing to Innstetten was out of the question; but she still wanted to see and talk to Annie, to clasp her to her breast, and after she'd thought it over for several days she knew how best to go about it.

The very next morning she dressed carefully in respectable black and headed for Unter den Linden to call on the Minister's wife. She sent in her card, which simply said: 'Effi von Innstetten, née von Briest.' Everything else had been left out, even the Baronin. 'Her Excellency will see you now,' and Effi followed the servant into an anteroom where she sat down and, despite her agitation, scrutinized the pictures on the walls. There was Guido Reni's* *Aurora*, but opposite it some English etchings after Benjamin West* in the well-known aquatint style with a lot of light and shade. One of the pictures was of King Lear* in the storm on the heath.

She had hardly finished her scrutiny when the door of the neighbouring room opened and a tall, slim lady with an engaging expression came in and held out her hand to the petitioner. 'My dear Frau von Innstetten,' she said, 'what a pleasure it is to see you again …'

As she said that, she went across to the sofa and, as she sat down, drew Effi down beside her.

Effi was moved by the kindness of heart that came out in all this. Not a trace of haughtiness or reproach, just fine, human sympathy. 'What can I do for you?' she went on.

The corners of Effi's mouth twitched. Finally she said, 'What brings me here is a request, the fulfilment of which might be possible with Your Excellency's help. I have a ten-year-old daughter whom I have not seen for three years, and would like to see again.'

The Minister's wife took Effi's hand and looked at her with a friendly expression.

'When I say I haven't seen her for three years, that isn't quite correct. I saw her three days ago.' And Effi gave a vivid description of her encounter with Annie. 'Running away from my own child. I know that once you've made your bed, you must lie in it, and I don't want to change anything in my life. The way it is, is the way it has to be; I knew what I was doing. But with the child, that's too hard, I want to see her now and again, not secretly and surreptitiously but with the knowledge and consent of all concerned.'

'With the knowledge and consent of all concerned,' the Minister's wife repeated. 'That means with the consent

of your husband. I see from this that his method of bringing up the child involves keeping her away from her mother, a procedure it is not my place to judge. Perhaps he's right, if you'll forgive me for saying so, my dear.'

Effi nodded.

'You yourself have come to accept your husband's attitude, and are simply asking that a natural feeling, perhaps the most beautiful of feelings (at least we women would agree on that), be allowed to express itself. Is that correct?'

'Entirely so.'

'And so I am to obtain permission for occasional visits to your house where you can attempt to win back your child's heart?'

Effi nodded her agreement again as the Minister's wife went on, 'I will do what I can, Frau von Innstetten. But it won't be easy. Your husband—forgive me for continuing to call him that—is a man who acts not on mood and impulse but according to principles, and he will find it hard to discard them, or even just lay them aside temporarily. If that were not the case, his attitude and way of bringing up the child would have long since been different. What your heart finds hard to bear, he regards as right.'

'So Your Excellency thinks it would perhaps be better if I withdrew my request?'

'Not at all. I just wanted to explain your husband's actions, not to justify them, and at the same time to indicate the difficulties we are likely to encounter. But I think we can do it, despite that. We women can get all sorts of things done, if we go about them in the right way and don't overdo it. Moreover, your husband is one of my particular admirers and is unlikely to refuse a request I make. We're having a little gathering tomorrow, at which I will see him, and the morning after you will have a note from me telling you whether I have gone about it in the right way, that is, successfully, or not. I think we will bring this off and you will see your child again and take delight in her. She's supposed to be a beautiful girl. Not surprisingly.'

Chapter 33

Two days later, as the Minister's wife had promised, a note arrived and Effi read:

'I am delighted, my dear Frau von Innstetten, that I have good news for you. Everything went as we wanted; your husband is too much of a gentleman to refuse a lady's request. However, at the same time—I feel I have to say this—I could see that his "yes" did not correspond to what he really thought was sensible and right. But let's not quibble when we should be happy. The arrangement we made was that your Annie should come around midday; may Heaven look kindly on your reunion.'

The note came with the second post, which meant there were probably only two hours until Annie would arrive. A short time, but still too long, and Effi walked restlessly round the two rooms and then back into the kitchen, where she talked about all sorts of things with Roswitha: about the ivy on the Christuskirche, next year the windows would probably be completely overgrown; about the porter, who hadn't turned the gas tap off properly again (next thing they'd all get blown up); and that she'd do better to get the paraffin from the big lamp-shop on Unter den Linden again rather than from Anhalterstrasse—she talked about all sorts of things except about Annie, because she didn't want to allow the fear she harboured despite, or perhaps because of, the Minister's wife's note, to surface.

Now it was midday. Finally there was a shy ring at the door and Roswitha went to look through the spyhole. Yes, it was Annie. Roswitha gave her a kiss, but didn't say a word, and quietly, as if there were someone who was sick in the house, led the child from the corridor first into the back room, then to the door to the front room.

'In you go, Annie.' And with these words—she didn't want to be in the way—she left the child and went back to the kitchen.

Effi was standing at the other end of the room with her back to the pier-glass when the child came in. 'Annie!' But Annie stayed by the door, without closing it, half in embarrassment, but also half deliberately, and so Effi rushed over to the child, lifted her up, and kissed her.

'Annie, my sweet child, I'm so delighted to see you. Come and tell me about yourself.' Saying that, she took Annie by the hand and led her over to the sofa to sit down there. Annie stood upright and, while still looking shyly at her mother, took the corner of the tablecloth, that was hanging down, in her left hand. 'Do you know, Annie, I saw you once?'

'Yes, I thought so too.'

'Now tell me all about yourself. How big you've grown! And there's the scar, Roswitha told me about that. You were always so wild and boisterous when you were playing. You get that from your Mama, she was like that too. And at school? I imagine you'll always be top of the class, you have that look about you, as if you're a model pupil and always come home with top marks. I've also heard that Frau von Wedelstädt praised you for that. That's the way it should be; I was also ambitious, but I didn't go to such a good school. I was always best at Mythology. What's your best subject?'

'I don't know.'

'Oh, I'm sure you do. People know that. Which do you get your best marks for?'

'Religion.'

'There you are, you do know. Yes, that's excellent; I wasn't so good at that, but that was probably the fault of the teaching. We just had a probationer.'

'We had a probationer as well.'

'And he's left?'

Annie nodded.

'Why did he leave?'

'I don't know. We have the pastor again now.'

'Whom you all love.'

'Yes. Two from the top class want to convert.'

'Oh, I understand; that's nice. And how's Johanna?'

'Johanna came with me as far as the house.'

'And why didn't you bring her up with you?'

'She said she preferred to stay outside and wait by the church over there.'

'And that's where you're to meet her afterwards?'

'Yes.'

'Well I hope she won't get impatient out there. There's a little garden at the front and the windows are half overgrown with ivy, as if it were an old church.'

'But I don't really want to keep her waiting.'

'Oh, I see, you're very considerate and I suppose I must be pleased about that. You just have to know how to

apportion it properly … And now tell me, how's Rollo getting on?'

'Rollo's fine. But Papa says he's getting very lazy; he's always lying in the sun.'

'I can believe that. He was like that when you were still little … Now tell me, Annie—today was just a chance to see each other again—will you come and visit me quite often?'

'Oh, certainly, if I'm allowed.'

'Then we could go for walks in the garden of Prince Albrecht's Palace.'

'Oh, certainly, if I'm allowed.'

'Or we'll go to Schilling's* for some ice-cream, pineapple or vanilla flavour, I've always liked that best.'

'Oh, certainly, if I'm allowed.'

This third 'if I'm allowed' was the last straw; Effi jumped up, and there was a flash of indignation in her eyes as she looked at the child. 'I think it's high time, Annie; otherwise Johanna will be getting impatient.' And she rang the bell. Roswitha, in the neighbouring room, came in at once. 'Roswitha, accompany Annie as far as the church. Johanna's waiting there. I hope she hasn't caught cold. I'd be sorry about that. Give Johanna my best wishes.'

At that the two of them left.

Hardly had Roswitha closed the door behind them, however, than Effi, who felt she was suffocating, tore open her dress and burst out into convulsive laughter. 'So that's what a reunion's like!' With that she rushed to the window, opened it wide, and looked for something to relieve her distress. And she found something. There was a bookshelf beside the window with a few volumes of Schiller and Körner,* and on top of these books of poetry, that were all the same height, were a Bible and hymn-book. She picked them up, because she needed something at which she could kneel down and pray, and placed the Bible and hymn-book on the edge of the table, just by where Annie had been standing. Then she threw herself down before them and said, in a low voice, 'O, Lord in Heaven, forgive me for what I've done; I was a child … But no, no, I wasn't a child, I was old enough to know what I was doing. And I did know and I don't want to lessen my guilt … but this is too much. For all this with the child, that isn't you, God, who are punishing me, it's him, him alone! I thought he had a noble heart and always felt small beside him; but now I know that it's him, he's the one who is small-minded. And because he's small-minded, he's cruel. Everyone who is small-minded is cruel. He taught the child that, he was always a schoolmaster, Crampas called him that, in mockery, but he was right. "Oh, certainly, if I'm allowed." You *can*, there's no "allowed" about it. I don't want any of you any more, I hate you, even my own child. Too much is too much. He just wanted to get on in the world, that's all.—Honour, honour, honour … and then he shot the poor man dead, a man whom I didn't even love and whom I'd forgotten because I didn't love him. It was just a piece of stupidity, and then blood and death. And my fault. And now he sends the child to me because he can't refuse the request of a minister's wife, and before he sends the child off he trains her like a parrot and teaches her to say, "if I'm allowed". I loathe what I did, but what I loathe even more is your virtue. Away with you. I have to have a life, but it won't last for ever anyway.'

When Roswitha came back, Effi was lying on the floor, her face turned away, as if she were dead.

Chapter 34

When Rummschüttel was called, Effi's condition caused him no little concern. The feverishness, that he had observed in her for some time now, seemed more pronounced than ever, and what was worse, there were also the first signs of a nervous disorder. His calm, friendly manner, which he could combine with a touch of whimsical humour, did Effi good. When he finally left, Roswitha went with him to the entrance hall and said, 'God, I'm so worried, Herr Doktor; what if it should come back, and it could. God—I can't get a moment's peace. That with the child was just too much. My poor Mistress. And still so young, at the age when some are only just starting out.'

'Don't take on so, Roswitha, she can always recover. But she has to get away from here. We'll see. Different air, different people.'

Two days later a letter arrived at Hohen-Cremmen that said:

'Dear Frau Von Briest,

My long-standing friendly relations with the Briest and Belling families and, not least, the great affection in which I hold your daughter, will be sufficient justification for these lines. Things cannot go on as they are. If something doesn't happen soon to pull your daughter out of the loneliness and joylessness of the life she has been leading for some years now, she will quickly waste away. She was always susceptible to consumption, for which reason I prescribed a visit to Ems years ago; a new disorder has now joined this old one: her nerves are wearing away. A change of air is needed to stop that continuing. But where should she go? It would not be difficult to find a suitable place among the Silesian spas, Salzbrunn would be good and, with the complication of the nerves, Reinerz even better. But the only place it can be is Hohen-Cremmen. For, my dear Frau von Briest, it is not air alone that will help your daughter recover; she is wasting away because she has no one but Roswitha. A faithful servant is fine, but loving parents are better. You must forgive an old man for interfering in things that are outside his medical competence. But then that is not entirely the case, for it is the doctor who is speaking here and doing his duty in making—please forgive the expression—demands … I have seen so much of life … But enough of that. Please give my regards to your husband,

your obedient servant,
Dr Rummschüttel.'

Frau von Briest had read the letter out to her husband. The two of them were sitting on the flagged path, with their backs to the garden room and facing the circular flowerbed with the sundial. The Virginia creeper winding round the windows fluttered in the breeze and there were a few dragonflies hovering over the pond in the bright sunshine. Briest remained silent, drumming his fingers on the tea-tray.

'Please stop drumming like that; say something instead.'

'Oh, Luise, what can I say? Drumming my fingers says it all. You've known what I think for years now. Back then, when Innstetten's letter came like a bolt from the blue, I agreed with you. But that's ages ago now; must I spend the rest of my life sitting here like the grand inquisitor? I've been fed up with it for a long time now, I can tell you.'

'Don't you start reproaching me, Briest, I love her as much as you do, perhaps even more, everyone has their own way of showing it. But we're not here to be weak and tender-hearted and show consideration for everything that is against the laws of God and man and that people condemn and, at least for the moment, rightly condemn.'

'Oh, come now. One thing is more important.'

'Of course. One thing is more important; but what is that one thing?'

'Parents' love for their children. And when you only have one child …'

'Then that's the end of the catechism and morality and the demands of "society".'

'Oh, Luise, you can go on about the catechism as much as you like, but don't go on about "society".'

'It's difficult to get by without society.'

'Without one's child as well. And, believe me, Luise, "society" is very good at turning a blind eye if it wants to. My view on all this: if the Rathenow Hussars come over, that's fine, and if they don't, that's fine too. I'll simply send a telegram: "Come, Effi." Do you agree?'

She stood up and gave him a kiss on the forehead. 'Of course I do. You won't have anything to reproach me for. It's not an easy step to take. Our life will change from the moment she comes.'

'I can put up with that. The rape is doing well and in the autumn I can go and hunt a hare. And I still enjoy a glass of red wine. And once I have the child back in the house again, it'll taste even better … And now I'll send off that telegram.'

*

Now Effi had been in Hohen-Cremmen for six months; she had the two first-floor rooms she used to have when she was on a visit there; the larger one had been set up for her personal use, Roswitha slept in the neighbouring

room. Rummschüttel's expectations of this stay and the good things associated with it had been, as far as possible, fulfilled. Her cough got better, the touch of bitterness, that had robbed her kindly face of much of its charm, disappeared, and there were days when she could laugh again. They didn't talk much about Kessin and the past, with the sole exception of Frau von Padden and, of course, Gieshübler, for whom old Herr von Briest had a particular liking. 'That Alonzo, that operatic Spaniard who keeps a Mirambo at home and brings up a Trippelli—yes, I think he must be a genius, and no one's going to persuade me otherwise.' Then Effi was forced to act out Gieshübler to the life, with his hat in his hand and his endless polite bows, which, given her gift for imitation, she could do very well, though unwillingly, because she always felt it was doing the dear, kind man an injustice.—Innstetten and Annie were never mentioned, even though it was settled that Annie would inherit Hohen-Cremmen.

Yes, Effi found a new lease of life, and her mother who, as women do, was not disinclined to regard the whole business, however painful it still was, as an interesting case, vied with her husband in showing her love and affection.

'It's a long time since we had such a good winter,' Briest said, and Effi got up from her seat and stroked the hair out of his forehead. But however pleasant all that was, as far as Effi's illness was concerned it was all just outward appearance, the truth was that the illness was still there, quietly eating away at her life. When Effi—she was once more wearing a blue-and-white striped pinafore dress with a loose belt, as she had done on the day she got engaged—came with quick, supple steps to wish her parents a good morning, they looked at her with joyful amazement, with joyful amazement but also with sadness, because they could not but be aware that it was not the brightness of youth but a kind of transfiguration that gave her slim figure and shining eyes this particular expression. Everyone who looked more closely could see that, only Effi herself couldn't and was entirely filled with the happiness of once more being in this place where she could find kindness and peace, reconciled with those whom she had always loved and by whom she had always been loved, even in the years of her misery and banishment.

She busied herself about the house, seeing to little improvements and embellishments. Her feeling for beauty meant she always made the right decision. However, she had completely given up reading and, above all, occupation with the arts. 'I've got so much out of them that I'm glad to be able to sit back and relax.' Presumably they also reminded her too much of her sad days. Instead she developed the art of quietly delighting in nature, and when the leaves fell from the plane trees, when the sun's beams glittered on the ice on the little pond, or when the first crocuses came into flower in the round bed when winter still wasn't quite over—it did her good, and she could spend hours looking at all that, forgetting what life had denied her or, to be more precise, what she herself had deprived herself of.

They were not entirely without visitors, not everyone was against her; her main intercourse, however, was with the schoolhouse and parsonage.

The fact that the two daughters of the schoolhouse had flown the nest didn't really matter, it would have been awkward with them anyway; but with her old friend Jahnke himself—who regarded not only the whole of Swedish Pomerania but also the area round Kessin as an offshoot of Scandinavia and was constantly asking questions about it—she got on better than ever. 'Yes, Jahnke, we had a steamboat and, as I've already told you in a letter or a conversation, I believe, I once almost crossed over to Visby. It's odd, but there's so many things in my life about which I can say "almost".'

'Pity, pity,' Jahnke said.

'Yes, a pity indeed. But I really did drive round Rügen, and that would have been something for you, Jahnke. Just imagine, Arkona* with a big campsite of the Wends. They say it's still visible, though I didn't get to see it; but not far away is Lake Hertha with white and yellow water lilies. It made me think of your Hertha …'

'Well, Hertha, yes … But you were going to tell me about Lake Hertha …'

'Yes, I was … And just imagine, Jahnke, close by the lake were two big stones, a sacrificial altar, smooth and still with the channels the blood ran down. From that time on I've felt a revulsion towards the Wends.'

'Oh, forgive me, Frau von Innstetten, but that wasn't the Wends. The business with the sacrificial altar was much, much earlier, before the birth of Christ; pure Teutons that we're all descended from, the Jahnkes certainly and perhaps the Briests as well …'

After that she dropped the topic of Rügen and Lake Hertha and asked about his grandchildren, and which ones were his favourites, Bertha's or Hertha's.

Yes, Effi got on well with Jahnke. But despite his intimate knowledge of Lake Hertha, Scandinavia, and Visby, he was a simple man, and it was inevitable that the lonely young woman much preferred her conversations with Niemeyer. And there had been an abundance of those during the autumn, as long as it was still possible to walk in the park, but they were interrupted for several months once winter came, because she didn't like to go to the parsonage itself. Frau Niemeyer had always been a very unpleasant woman, and now she really got on her high horse, even though in the opinion of the congregation she wasn't entirely irreproachable herself.

It was like that throughout the winter, much to Effi's dismay. But when, at the beginning of April, the bushes had a flush of green and the paths in the park dried out quickly, the walks started again.

Once, when they were taking a walk, they heard the cuckoo in the distance, and Effi counted how many times it called. She had taken Niemeyer's arm and said, 'There's the cuckoo. I don't want to take it as an omen. But

tell me, my friend, what do you think of life?'

'Oh, my dear Effi, there's no point in asking me a question like that. You'll have to find a philosopher or send a request to a university. What do I think of life? A lot and not very much. Sometimes it's quite a lot and sometimes it's not very much at all.'

'That's right, my friend, I like that. I don't need to know any more.' As she was saying that, they came to the swing. She jumped up on it as nimbly as when she'd been a young girl, and before the old man, who was watching her, could recover from the shock, she was sitting between the two ropes and had set the seat moving by adroitly swinging her body to and fro. It was only a matter of seconds before she was flying through the air and, holding on with just one hand, she pulled off a little silk scarf she had round her neck and chest and waved it, as if she were full of happiness and high spirits. Then she let the swing slow down and jumped off and took Niemeyer's arm again.

'Effi, you're still the way you used to be.'

'No. I wish I were. But that's quite far back in the past, and I just wanted to try it again. Oh, it was lovely, and the air did me good; I felt as if I were flying up to heaven. Do you think I'll get there? Tell me, my friend, you must know. Please, please …'

Niemeyer took her head in his two old hands, kissed her on the forehead, and said, 'Yes, Effi, you will.'

Chapter 35

Effi spent the whole day out in the park, because she needed fresh air; old Doctor Wiesike from Friesack was also happy with that, however, in this he gave her too much freedom to do as she liked, with the result that during a chilly spell in May she caught a bad cold; she had a temperature, coughed a lot, and the doctor, who usually came every third day, now came daily and was at his wits' end how to deal with the situation, since the sleeping-pills and cough medicine Effi asked for couldn't be given her because of her high temperature.

'What's going to come of all this, Doctor?' old Briest asked. 'You know her from when she was little, you delivered her. I don't like all this, she's losing weight visibly, and the red patches and the way her eyes shine when she suddenly gives me a questioning look. What do you think? What's going to happen? Is she going to die?'

Wiesike slowly shook his head from side to side. 'I wouldn't say that, Herr von Briest. I don't like this temperature she has. But we'll get it down again, then she'll have to go to Switzerland or to Mentone. Pure air and a pleasant environment, that'll help her forget the past …'

'Lethe, Lethe.'*

'Yes, the water of Lethe.' Wiesike smiled. 'Pity our old friends the Greeks only left us the word and not the spring itself …'

'Or at least the prescription for it; spa waters can be copied nowadays. Good Lord, Wiesike, we could make a packet if we could establish a sanatorium for that here: Friesack as a spring of oblivion. Well, for now we'll have to try the Riviera. Mentone is on the Riviera, isn't it? The price of corn's very low at the moment, but what must be, must be. I'll talk to my wife about it.'

He did that, and his wife immediately agreed; his suggestion fell in with her desire to see the south which—presumably because of the secluded life they led—had recently grown very strong. But Effi would hear nothing of it. 'You are good to me. And I'm selfish enough to accept your sacrifice, if I thought it would do me any good. But I'm convinced it would just make me worse.'

'You're only imagining that, Effi.'

'No. I've become very irritable; everything annoys me. Not here with you. You spoil me and keep everything out of my way. But that's not possible when you're travelling, unpleasant things can't just be swept away; it'll start with the conductor and end with the waiter. I only have to imagine their smug faces and I come out in a hot flush. No, no, let me stay here. I don't want to go away from Hohen-Cremmen again, this is where I belong. I prefer the heliotrope round the sundial in the flowerbed down there to Mentone.'

After this they dropped the plan, and Wiesike, who had had great hopes of Italy, said, 'We must respect that, it's not just a caprice; people with that kind of illness are very sensitive and seem to know with a remarkable degree of certainty what is beneficial for them and what isn't. And what Frau Effi said about conductors and waiters is actually quite right, and there's no air that has sufficient healing power to make up for the irritation in the hotel—if you do get irritated by it. So let's keep her here; if it's not the best thing for her, it's certainly not the worst.'

That turned out to be the case. Effi recovered, put on a little weight (old Briest was a fanatic about weighing yourself), and lost much of her irritability. However, her need for fresh air was constantly growing and she spent many hours out in the open, especially when there was a west wind and grey clouds scudding across the sky. On such days she would go out over the fields and the Marshes, often for more than two miles, and when she was tired would sit on a wooden fence and look, lost in dreams, at the buttercups and the red docks waving in the breeze.

'You always go by yourself,' Frau von Briest said. 'With our people you're safe; but there's a lot of riff-raff from outside prowling round.'

That made an impression on Effi, who had never thought of danger, and when she was alone with Roswitha she said, 'I can't really take you with me, Roswitha; you're too fat and not very sure-footed any more.'

'Oh, Madam, it's not *that* bad. I could still get married.'

'Of course,' Effi laughed. 'One can always do that. But, you know, Roswitha, if I only had a dog to go with me. Papa's hunting-dog isn't attached to me at all. Hunting-dogs are so stupid and they only get up when the huntsman or the gardener takes his rifle off the hook. I often think of Rollo.'

'Yes,' Roswitha said, 'they haven't got one like Rollo here. But that's not to say anything against "here". Hohen-Cremmen is very good.'

*

It was three or four days after this conversation that Innstetten went to his study an hour earlier than usual. The morning sun, which was very bright, had woken him, and since he felt he wouldn't get back to sleep again he had got up in order to start on a task that had been waiting on his desk for some time.

Now it was a quarter past eight, and he rang. Johanna brought the breakfast tray on which, beside the *Kreuzzeitung* and the *Norddeutsche Allgemeine*,* there were two letters. He glanced at the addresses and recognized from the handwriting that one was from the Minister. But the other? The postmark was smudged, and 'The Honourable Herr Baron von Innstetten' betrayed a happy unfamiliarity with the customary modes of address. That corresponded to the writing, that was very crude. But then the apartment was designated with remarkable precision: 'W. Keithstrasse 1c, second floor.'

Innstetten was enough of a civil servant to open the letter from 'His Excellency' first. 'My dear Innstetten, I am delighted to be able to inform you that His Majesty has deigned to sign your appointment, and I offer you my sincere congratulations.' Innstetten was delighted at the Minister's personal note, almost more than at the appointment itself, for as far as climbing the ladder was concerned, he had taken a somewhat critical view of that kind of thing since the morning in Kessin when Crampas had said farewell to him with a look of which he was constantly aware. Since then he saw things in a different light. An honour, what was it, after all was said and done? During what had become an ever more cheerless existence he had thought more than once of a half-forgotten civil-service anecdote from fifty years ago about Ladenberg, who had been a minister.* When, after a long wait, he had been granted the Order of the Red Eagle, he had flung it down furiously, crying, 'Stay there until you turn *black*.' It had probably eventually turned into a Black Eagle, but much too late and certainly not to the satisfaction of the recipient. Everything that should give us pleasure is bound to time and circumstance, and something that makes us happy one day is worthless the next. Innstetten was deeply aware of this, and, clear as it was that honours and marks of favour from the monarch were, or at least *had been*, important to him, it was clear now that these glittering prizes didn't mean much, and that what people called 'happiness' was, if it existed at all, something quite different from that glittering show. 'If I'm right, happiness consists in two things: on the one hand in being in a place where you belong (but what civil servant can say that of himself?), on the other, and best of all, in a comfortable course of daily life, that is, having a good sleep and a new pair of boots that aren't too tight. If the seven hundred and twenty minutes of a twelve-hour day pass without any particular vexation, you can call it a happy day.' That day Innstetten was again in the kind of mood that led to such mournful reflections. Now he picked up the second letter. After he had read it he passed his hand over his brow, with the painful sense that there was a happiness he'd once had but had no longer, nor could ever have again.

Johanna came in and announced, 'Geheimrat Wüllersdorf.'

He was already in the doorway. 'Congratulations, Innstetten.'

'From you I can believe it; the others will just be annoyed. Moreover …'

'Moreover. Surely you're not going to cavil at a moment like this.'

'No. I feel shamed by the favour His Majesty has shown me. And, if anything, even more by the good opinion of the Minister, whom I have to thank for all this.'

'But …'

'But I've forgotten how to take pleasure in things. If I were to say that to anyone else but you, then it would be taken merely as a manner of speaking. But you, you will know what I mean. Just look round here; how dreary and desolate everything is. I dread it when Johanna, a so-called jewel, comes in. This putting on a show (and Innstetten copied Johanna's posture), this half-comical flaunting of the bosom that seems to be making a particular demand, whether on me or on humanity in general I don't know, but I find it all so dismal, so dreary, it would be enough to make one blow one's brains out, if it weren't so ridiculous.'

'My dear Innstetten, you're going to become head of department in a mood like that?'

'Pooh! Can it be any other way? Read this, it's just arrived.'

Wüllersdorf took the second letter, the one with the illegible postmark, grinned at the 'Honourable', and went over to the window, where it was easier to read.

'DEAR BARON,

You will be surprised to receive a letter from me, but it's about Rollo. Last year little Annie told us that Rollo had got very lazy now, but that doesn't matter here, here he can be as lazy as he likes, the lazier the better. And the Mistress would like it so much. She keeps on saying, when she goes out into the Marshes or over the fields, "Actually, I'm afraid, Roswitha, because I'm so alone out there, but who can go with me? Rollo, yes that would be fine; he doesn't bear me a grudge. That's the good thing about animals that they're not concerned about that kind of thing." That is what my Mistress said and I've nothing to add, I'd just like to ask you to give my greetings to little Annie. And to Johanna as well.

From your most faithful servant,
Roswitha Gellenhagen.'

'Yes,' Wüllersdorf said as he folded the letter up again, 'we're no match for her.'

'I think so too.'

'And that's the reason why all the rest seems so questionable to you.'

'That's right. It's been going round in my mind for a long time now, and with these simple lines and their unintended or even intended reproach, my mind is in turmoil. It's been tormenting me for ages and I'd like to be free of this whole business, I can't enjoy anything any more; the more distinctions I receive, the more I feel that all that's nothing. I've made a mess of my life, and so, thinking about it, I've come to the conclusion that I ought not to have anything more to do with all this striving and vanity, and should exercise my schoolmasterly talent,

which is probably my most essential self, as a kind of moral authority. That sort of person has existed. If that were to work, I'd have to become a terribly famous figure, like that Doctor Wichern* in the Rauhes Haus in Hamburg, that miracle-worker who could tame all criminals with his look and his piety …'

'Hm, there's no objection to that; that would be possible.'

'No, it's not possible. Not even that. The fact is, everything's closed to me. How could I get a killer to see the error of his ways? To do that, you have to have a clean bill of moral health yourself. And if that isn't the case, and you yourself are tarred with the same brush, then you must at least pretend to be madly repentant and put on a colossal act of remorse.'

Wüllersdorf nodded.

'You're nodding, you see. But I can't do any of that any more. I can't manage to do the man in the hair-shirt any more, and certainly not the dervish or fakir who dances himself to death while emitting self-accusations. And since none of that is possible, what I've worked out as the best solution is: to get away from here and mingle with pitch-black fellows, who know nothing of civilized behaviour and honour. Those happy ones! For it's precisely all that nonsense that's to blame for everything. You don't do that kind of thing out of an overflow of feeling, which might, after all, be acceptable, but because of an abstract idea … Ideas! … and then one man is done for and you're done for too. Only worse.'

'Oh, come on, Innstetten, those are just fancies, notions. What's all this nonsense about going to darkest Africa? That's something for a lieutenant with debts, but not for a man like you. Are you going to wear a red fez and preside over a conclave of natives, or become a blood-brother of a son-in-law of King Mutesa?* Or are you going to inch your way along the Congo, in a solar topee with six holes in it, until you reappear in the Cameroons* or thereabouts? Impossible!'

'Impossible? Why? And if it is impossible, then what can I do?'

'Simply stay here and resign yourself to the inevitable. Who is free of care? Who doesn't say every day, "A very dubious business, actually." As you know, I have my own cross to bear, not quite the same as yours, but not much less heavy. All this about crawling round the jungle or sleeping in a termite mound's nonsense. If someone enjoys that kind of thing, then let them do it, but it's not for the likes of us. Stand in the breach and hold out until you fall, that's best. But until then, make the most you can of the tiniest little detail, and have an eye for when the first violets appear or the flowers round the memorial to Queen Luise are blooming or the little girls in their lace-up boots are skipping. Or you could go to Potsdam and visit the Friedenskirche where Emperor Friedrich* is buried and they're just starting to build a mausoleum for him. And once you're there, think about his life, and if that doesn't calm you down, then nothing will.'

'All right, then. But a year's a long time and every single day … and then the evenings.'

'Those are the easiest to occupy. There's *Sardanapalus* and *Coppélia* with Antonietta dell'Era* at the ballet, and after them you can have a beer at Siechen's. Not something to be sneezed at. Three glasses always calm you down. There are still many, a great many, who have the same attitude to the whole business as we do, and one of them, for whom a lot of things had gone wrong, said to me, "Believe me, Wüllersdorf, life's completely impossible without jury-rigged expedients." The man who said that was a seaman so must have known what he was talking about. And he was right. A day doesn't pass when I'm not reminded of those "jury-rigged expedients".'

Once he had got that off his chest, Wüllersdorf took his hat and stick. But Innstetten, who at his friend's comments had recalled his own previous reflections on 'minor happiness', nodded his partial agreement and smiled to himself.

'And where are you off to now, Wüllersdorf? It's still too early for the Ministry.'

'I'm taking the day off today. First an hour walking along the canal as far as the Charlottenburg lock and then back again. Then I'll drop in to Huth's on Potsdamer Strasse, taking the little wooden steps carefully. There's a flower-shop at the bottom.'

'And you enjoy that? That's enough for you?'

'I wouldn't go so far as to say that. But it helps a little. I meet various regulars there, early birds as far as a glass of wine's concerned—I think it would be prudent not to mention their names. One will talk about the Duke of Ratibor,* another about Prince-Bishop Kopp,* and a third probably about Bismarck. There's always a bit that's worth hearing. Three-quarters is wrong, but as long as it's amusing, you don't waste time finding fault with it but are glad to listen.'

And with that he left.

Chapter 36

May was beautiful, June even more so, and Effi, once she'd overcome a painful feeling Rollo's arrival had initially aroused in her, was overjoyed to have the faithful animal with her again. Roswitha was praised, and old Briest went on and on to his wife with words of praise for Innstetten, who was a gentleman, not petty, his heart had always been in the right place. 'Pity that silly business should have come between them. They would have been a model couple, actually.' The only one to remain calm at the reunion was Rollo himself, either because he had no sense of time or regarded the separation as a muddle that had now simply been sorted out. That he had grown old was presumably also part of the explanation. He was sparing with his signs of affection, as he had been with his manifestation of joy at seeing Effi again, but his faithfulness had, if possible, grown even stronger. He never left his mistress's side. He was gracious towards the hunting-dog, but treated it as a being on a lower level. At night he lay on the rush mat outside Effi's door, in the morning, when breakfast was taken outside, by the sundial, always quiet, always sleepy; only when Effi got up from the table, went into the hall, and took first her sunhat and then her parasol from the stand, did his youth return and, unconcerned whether his strength was to be put to a hard or an easy test, he would race up and down the village street, and only calm down when they came to the first fields. Effi, for whom fresh air was more important than the beauty of her surroundings, avoided the little woods and mostly followed the wide street, that was lined with ancient elms and, where the high-road began, with poplars, to the railway station, a good hour's walk. She enjoyed everything, happily breathing in the scent coming over from the rape- and clover-fields or watching the larks rising, counting the wells and troughs where the cattle went to drink. As they did so a soft tinkling sound reached her ear, and she felt as if she should close her eyes and pass into sweet oblivion. Near the station, close by the road, was a road-roller. That was her daily resting place, from which she could watch what was happening on the railway embankment; trains came and went, and sometimes she saw two trails of smoke that coincided for a moment, then separated to the right and left until they disappeared behind villages and woods. Then Rollo would sit beside her, sharing her lunch, and when he caught the last morsel he would dash, presumably in a show of gratitude, furiously up and down some furrow or other, only pausing when a couple of partridges he had disturbed flew up from the eggs they'd been sitting on in one of the adjoining furrows.

*

'What a lovely summer! A year ago I'd never have thought I could be so happy again, Mama dear.'—Effi said that every day, walking round the pond with her mother, or breaking an early apple off the branch and boldly biting into it. For she had excellent teeth. Then Frau von Briest would stroke her hand and say, 'First of all just get well again, Effi, really well, and happiness will come; not your old happiness, but something new. There are, thank God, many kinds of happiness. And, you'll see, we'll find something for you.'

'You're so good to me, yet I've changed your life and made you into old people before your time.'

'Oh, don't say that, Effi dear. When it happened, I thought the same. Now I know that our quiet life is better than all the noise and hurly-burly we had before. And if you continue to get better, we could still travel. When Wiesike suggested Mentone you were unwell and irritable, and because you were unwell, you were quite right with what you said about conductors and waiters. But once you have stronger nerves again, then it will be possible, then you won't get irritated any more, you'll just laugh at their grand manner and curled hair. And then the blue sea and white sails and the rocks overgrown with red cactus—I haven't seen it yet, but I imagine it like that. And I'd like to see it some time.'

Thus the summer passed, and the clear August nights with shooting stars were already gone. During those nights Effi had sat at the window until after midnight and never wearied of watching. 'I was never a very good Christian, but I wonder whether we do come from up there after all and, once things are over here, will return to our heavenly home, to the stars up there, or even beyond? I don't know and I don't want to know, I just feel this longing.'

Poor Effi, you spent too long looking up at the wonders of the heavens and thinking about them, and the result was that the night air and the mist rising from the pond brought on a recurrence of her illness and when Wiesike was called, he took Briest to one side and said, 'She won't recover; prepare yourselves, the end will come soon.'

What he had said was only too true, and a few days after—not late, it wasn't quite ten o'clock—Roswitha came down and said to Frau von Briest, 'Madam, the Mistress upstairs is in a bad way; she's talking very quietly to herself all the time, and now and then it's as if she were praying but won't admit it, and I don't know, but I feel it could be over any moment now.'

'Does she want to speak to me?'

'She didn't say so, but I think she would like to. You know how she is; she doesn't want to disturb and worry you. But I think it would be a good idea.'

‘That’s all right, Roswitha,’ Frau von Briest said, ‘I’ll come.’

And before the clock struck, Frau von Briest was going up the stairs and went to Effi’s room. The window was open and she was lying on a chaise-longue beside it.

Frau von Briest pushed across a little chair with three gold slats in the ebony back, took Effi’s hand, and said, ‘How are you, Effi? Roswitha says you’re very feverish.’

‘Oh, Roswitha gets so worried about everything. I could tell she thought I was dying. Well I don’t know, but she thinks everyone should be as worried as she is.’

‘Are you so calm about dying, Effi dear?’

‘Very calm, Mama.’

‘Are you sure about that? Everyone is attached to life, young people above all. And you’re still so young, Effi.’

Effi remained silent for a while. Then she said, ‘You know that I haven’t read very much. Innstetten was often surprised at that and wasn’t really happy about it.’

It was the first time she had mentioned Innstetten’s name, and that made a great impression on her mother, showing her clearly that the end had come.

‘But I think’, Frau von Briest said, ‘you were going to tell me something.’

‘Yes, I was, because of what you said about me being still so young. Of course I’m still young, but that doesn’t matter. It was in the happy days when Innstetten used to read to me in the evening; he had very good books, and in one it said: a man was called away from a merry banquet and the next day he asked what had happened after he’d left. And he was told, “Oh, all sorts of things happened, but you didn’t really miss anything.” And those words have stuck in my mind, Mama—it doesn’t really mean very much when you’re called away from the banquet a little earlier.’

Frau von Briest said nothing. But Effi pushed herself up a little higher and said, ‘And since I’ve been talking about the old times and Innstetten, there’s something else I have to tell you, Mama dear.’

‘You’ll be making yourself overwrought, Effi.’

‘No, no; getting something off my chest won’t make me overwrought, it’ll calm me down. I just wanted to tell you: I’m dying reconciled to God and the world, also reconciled to *him*.’

‘Were you, then, so full of bitterness towards him in your heart? Forgive me for saying this now, Effi, but actually you yourself were the cause of your suffering.’

Effi nodded. ‘Yes, Mama. And I’m sad that was the case. But when all the awful things happened, last of all that with Annie, you know what I mean, then, if you’ll excuse the silly expression, I played him at his own game and quite seriously made myself think he was to blame, because he was so detached and calculating and, in the end, cruel as well. Then I really did curse him.’

‘And that weighs on you now?’

‘Yes. And I want him to know that it has become clear to me, here in these days of illness, that have been almost my best days, that he was right in everything he did. In the business with poor Crampas—after all, what else could he do? And then the thing he did that struck deepest: that he has brought up my child to keep her distance from me—however hard I find it and however much it hurts to admit it, he was right there as well. Tell him that, tell him I died convinced of that. It will comfort, hearten, perhaps reconcile him. There was much that was good in his nature, and he was as noble as anyone can be who lacks true love.’

Frau von Briest could see that Effi was exhausted and seemed to be asleep, or was trying to get to sleep. She stood up quietly and left. However, hardly had she gone than Effi also stood up and went to sit by the open window in order to suck in the night air once more. The stars were twinkling and not a leaf was moving in the park. But the longer she listened, the clearer she could hear again the soft sound, like fine rain falling on the plane trees. A feeling of liberation came over her. ‘Peace, peace.’

*

It was a month later, and September was coming to an end. The weather was fine but the foliage in the park was already showing a lot of red and yellow, and since the equinox, that had brought three days of gales, leaves were strewn all over the ground. There had been a small change in the round flowerbed: the sundial had gone and in its place there had been, since the previous day, a white marble stone with just ‘Effi Briest’ on it and a cross underneath. That had been Effi’s last request, ‘I’d like to have my old name on my gravestone; I brought nothing but dishonour to the other one.’ And that had been promised.

Yes, the stone had come and been set up the previous day, and now Briest and his wife were sitting facing the spot and looking at it and at the heliotrope, that had been carefully left there and now framed the stone. Rollo was lying beside it, his head on his paws.

Wilke, whose gaiters were getting fatter and fatter, brought their breakfast and the post, and old Briest said, ‘Have the chaise brought round, Wilke. I want to go out for a drive with my wife.’

By this time Frau von Briest had poured the coffee and looked across at the flowerbed. ‘Look, Briest, Rollo’s lying by the stone again. He feels it more deeply than we do. He’s not eating, either.’

‘Yes, Luise, dumb animals. That’s what I always say. We’re not so great as we think. We’re always talking about instinct; in the end it’s probably what’s best.’

‘Don’t go on like that. When you get one of your philosophical turns … Don’t take it amiss, Briest, but you’re really not up to that. You have your common sense, but when it comes to that kind of question, you can’t …’

‘Not really, no.’

‘And if there are questions that should be asked, they’re quite different ones, Briest, and I can tell you that not a day passes since the poor child’s been lying there when I haven’t been asking myself those questions …’

‘What questions?’

‘Whether it wasn’t perhaps our fault?’

‘Nonsense, Luise. Why do you say that?’

‘Whether we shouldn’t have brought her up differently, more strictly. We ourselves, that is. Niemeyer’s actually no use at all, because he leaves everything in doubt. And then, Briest, much as it pains me to say so … your constant double entendres … and finally, something I reproach myself for, since I don’t think I should come out of this without blame: was she not perhaps too young?’

Rollo, who woke up as she said this, slowly shook his head from side to side, and Briest said calmly, ‘Oh, Luise, don’t … It’s too big a question.’

Explanatory Notes

3 *Hohen-Cremmen*: Kremmen is a town near Potsdam, south-west of Berlin; Fontane has moved it a little further to the west. The Briests are a historically attested family from the Havelland, which died out in the early nineteenth century. The daughter of its last male heir married Friedrich Baron de la Motte Fouqué (1777–1843), a Romantic writer once famous for his historical dramas and his fairy-tale *Undine* (1811). The Briests lived at Nennhausen, some thirty-five miles from Berlin.

Georg Wilhelm: ruler of Brandenburg, the core area of Prussia, from 1619 to 1640. Until 1701, when Friedrich adopted the title of King, the rulers of Brandenburg were called Electors because they had the right to participate in electing the Holy Roman Emperor.

Canna indica: a shrub, often two metres tall, with bright red flowers.

Effi: probably short for Euphemie or Eva (cf. p. 24).

4 *Rathenow Hussars*: Rathenow is a town on the river Havel, west of Berlin and evidently close to Hohen-Cremmen; it contained the garrison of the Zieten Hussars, a light-cavalry regiment.

Colonel Goetze: Goetze is the name of a Prussian noble family.

5 *Jahnke*: not a local man, but a native of Mecklenburg, on the Baltic; his mention anticipates Effi's later removal to the distant port of Kessin. The name Jahnke occurs in *My Childhood*, Fontane's memoirs of his early residence in Swinemünde, on which Kessin is based.

Hanseatic League: a medieval association of north German commercial cities, including Hamburg, Lübeck, Rostock, Greifswald, and others.

Fritz Reuter: a novelist (1810–74) who wrote in an accessible Low German dialect and was popular throughout the German-speaking world. The identical twin girls Mining and Lining ('-ing' is a diminutive suffix) are characters in his novel *Ut mine Stromtid* ('From my Time as a Farm Manager', 1862–4).

Hertha: supposedly the name of a goddess worshipped by the ancient Germans, according to a misreading of the name 'Nerthus' provided by the Roman historian Tacitus (*c*.55–115 CE) in his *Germania*. It reappears with 'Lake Hertha' (Ch. 24).

Klitzing: the name of a well-known Prussian military family.

Gabriel: see Luke 1: 26–8. This is the first of several humorous and disrespectful allusions to passages from the Bible.

Schwantikow: an imaginary place.

Landrat: the chief administrator of a district (*Kreis*), who, as the local representative of the government, mediates between the district and the state.

6 *eve-of-wedding party*: it is a German custom to hold a *Polterabend* (lit. 'noisy evening') before a wedding and to smash crockery; the pieces are supposed to bring the couple luck.

7 *the fourth commandment*: the Lutheran Church, like the Roman Catholic Church but not the Church of England, follows the sequence of commandments in Deuteronomy 5, where the fourth begins 'Honour thy father and thy mother'. In the other sequence, in Exodus 20, this is the fifth.

Belling: an actual family, whose members included Wilhelm Sebastian von Belling (1719–79), a cavalry general under Frederick the Great.

Ritterschaftsrat: the title indicates that Briest helps to represent the *Ritterschaft*, i.e. the landowning nobility, in the parliament of his province.

8 *when war broke out*: the Franco-Prussian War, 1870–1. See the Introduction, p. xii.

Perleberg Lancers: a cavalry regiment stationed at Perleberg near Potsdam, south-west of Berlin.

Bismarck: Otto von Bismarck (1815–98), conservative politician, who became prime minister and foreign minister of Prussia in 1862. He successfully directed wars with Denmark (1864), Austria (1866), and France (1870–1). In 1867 he formed the North German Confederation, which brought the great majority of the German states under German leadership and prepared the way for the establishment of the German Empire in 1871. Besides continuing as Prussian prime minister, Bismarck became Imperial Chancellor, and was known popularly as the Iron Chancellor. He received the title of Prince in 1871. He remained in office until his dismissal by the new Emperor, Wilhelm II, in 1890.

Kessin: an imaginary town, but closely based on Swinemünde (now Świnoujście in Poland) on the Baltic island of Usedom, where Fontane lived from 1827 to 1832. However, Fontane has transferred it to Eastern Pomerania (Hinterpommern), a region on the Baltic coast stretching from Kammin almost to Danzig (now Gdańsk), now entirely in Poland, and in Fontane's day a byword for 'the back of beyond'.

figleaf: an allusion to the figleaves with which Adam and Eve covered their nakedness (Genesis 3: 7).

13 *Luise*: Frau von Briest bears the evocative name of Luise, Princess of Mecklenburg (1776–1810), the wife of King Friedrich Wilhelm III. Queen Luise's support for Prussian resistance to Napoleon, together with her early death, made her into a national icon.

15 *Hotel du Nord*: a first-class hotel, situated on the boulevard Unter den Linden.

mesquineries: Fr. 'meanness'.

Spinn & Mencke, Goschenhofer: prestigious furniture dealers which advertised themselves as supplying the Court.

Tsar Alexander Guards Regiment: a grenadier-guard regiment named after Tsar Alexander I of Russia (Prussia's ally against Napoleon), garrisoned in Berlin.

Die Fliegenden Blätter: a humorous illustrated weekly which ran from 1844 till 1928.

16 *Café Bauer*: a café opposite Kranzler, which in the afternoons and evenings attracted a less respectable clientele and which, therefore, the Briests could not visit at such times.

Island of the Blest: a mythological painting by Arnold Böcklin (1827–1901), actually entitled *The Island of the Living*, showing a paradisal scene with nymphs bathing and a centaur standing in the water with a nymph on his back; Dagobert is making a strong sexual allusion, which Effi's father repeats a few pages later. The painting's erotic content aroused controversy when it was first displayed in 1878.

Princess Maria Anna: the wife of Prince Friedrich Karl of Prussia (1828–85) who served as a field-marshal in the Franco-Prussian War.

Demuth's: a smart shop, also on Unter den Linden, supplying travel equipment.

17 *sketches*: Effi intends her 'Polterabend' to include performances or charades involving fancy dress. Her prohibition on dressing as a mousetrap seller alludes to the common superstitious association of mice with death: see Hanns Bächtold-Stäubli, *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, 10 vols. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1927–41), vol. 6, cols. 44–5.

18 *"Late ye come, but ye have come …"*: a very familiar, indeed stale, quotation from the opening line of the play *The Piccolomini* (1799) by Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805).

Käthchen von Heilbronn: in this play (1810) by the Prussian dramatist Heinrich von Kleist (1778–1811), the middle-class Käthchen falls in love with the noble Count Wetter von Strahl and follows him about devotedly. In Act IV, scene 2, Käthchen lies sleeping under an elder tree (where, according to superstition, one will dream of one's future partner) and talks in her sleep to the Count, calling him 'my lord' and confessing her love to him.

Innstettens: the name is Fontane's invention, but may have been inspired by the noble family Innhausen, with which he was personally acquainted.

19 *by-blow*: an allusion to the popular dramatist Ernst von Wildenbruch (1845–1909), whose father was an illegitimate son of Prince Louis Ferdinand of Prussia (1772–1806).

Cinderella: a comedy based on the story of Cinderella by the prolific dramatist Roderich Benedix (1811–73), first performed in 1867. Fontane reviewed a production favourably in 1873.

20 *Sedan Day*: 2 September, the anniversary of Prussia's decisive victory in 1870 in the Franco-Prussian War.

21 *Lot*: nephew of Abraham, notorious for sleeping with his own daughters when he was drunk (Genesis 19).

26 *in that sign*: an ironic allusion to the story that the Emperor Constantine, before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312, saw a cross in the sky with the words: 'In this sign you shall conquer'; after his victory he made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Hövel's: an elegant confectioner's shop on Unter den Linden.

garter: it was once customary to end a ball with a game of forfeits, one of which was a lady's garter.

27 *Kögel*: Rudolf Kögel (1829–96), Court preacher in Berlin from 1863 on and spiritual adviser to King Wilhelm I.

Valhalla: a classical building established by King Ludwig I of Bavaria and completed in 1842 as a German hall of fame, with plaques and busts commemorating famous Germans from ancient times to the present; it stands on a hill overlooking the Danube near Regensburg.

30 *Pinakothek*: the Alte Pinakothek, a famous art gallery in Munich; the *other one* may be the nearby Glyptothek, a collection of sculptures.

31 *Four Seasons*: a distinguished hotel in the Maximilianstrasse in Munich.

Palladio: Andrea Palladio (1508–80), architect who worked from Greek and Roman models and designed many classical buildings in Vicenza and villas in the surrounding countryside.

"In Padua there he buried lies": quotation from Goethe, *Faust, Part I*, line 2925. By quoting this relatively trivial line, Innstetten shows his conventional reverence for German cultural icons.

32 *St Privat panorama*: a large picture by Emil Hünten, on public view from 1881, depicting the Prussian capture of St Privat, one of the turning-points in the Franco-Prussian War. A panorama is 'a large circular painting, housed in a rotunda and viewed from a raised central platform': Andrew Cusack, ' "Civibus aevi futuri": Panoramic Historiography in Fontane's *Wanderungen durch die Mark Brandenburg*', *Modern Language Review*, 104 (2009), 746–61 (at 747).

Klein-Tantow: an actual place in the extreme north-east of Germany, with a station on the railway-line between Berlin and Stettin (now Szczecin in Poland).

33 *Varzin*: now Warcino in Poland. The hunting-lodge there was given to Bismarck by the nation in 1867, and remained in the possession of his family till their expulsion in 1945.

starosta: a Polish term meaning the head of the local community.

34 *Kashubs*: speakers of a West Slavonic language closely related to Polish. Their territory is around Danzig (Gdańsk), much further east than Swinemünde.

35 *Macpherson*: based on Macdonald, a Scottish engineer whom Fontane mentions in *My Childhood* as living in Swinemünde.

Beza: suggested by Beda, the mayor of Swinemünde mentioned in *My Childhood*.

General de Meza: Christian Julius de Meza (1792–1865), a Danish general of Portuguese extraction.

Flying Dutchman: according to a legend, retold by Heinrich Heine and made famous by Richard Wagner (1813–83) with his opera *The Flying Dutchman* (1843), the Dutchman is punished for blasphemy by having to sail his ship round the world until a woman can be found to redeem him by her sacrificial love.

Black Flags: the Black Flag army consisted of Chinese bandits who, after the defeat of the Taiping Rebellion in China in 1864, moved south into Vietnam and helped the Vietnamese army to resist French invaders. They also harassed European vessels trading on the Red River; this must be where the Kessin captain practised his piracy. The Black Flag army was disbanded after the Sino-French War of 1884–5, which left the French in effective control of *Tonkin* (northern Vietnam).

36 *Rollo*: or Rolf, a Scandinavian leader who was granted the fief of Normandy in 913; his descendants were called Dukes of Normandy.

39 *Alonzo Gieshübler*: the humorous device of giving a character a forename incongruous with his surname occurs elsewhere in Fontane's novels (e.g. Dr Niels Wrschowitz in *The Stechlin*), and was adopted by his admirer Thomas Mann for such misfits as Tonio Kröger in the story of that name.

Small and cramped is my cottage: the first line of an anonymous folk-song.

42 *Bottegone*: a cafe in Florence.

Wrangel: an evocative name borne by many famous soldiers in both Germany and Sweden; here it refers to the field-marshal Friedrich Heinrich Ernst von Wrangel (1784–1877), who in 1848 led Prussian and other German troops in support of the revolutionaries seeking to detach Schleswig-Holstein from Denmark, and in 1864 was supreme commander of the Prussian troops in the Dano-Prussian War.

43 *good people but poor musicians*: a proverbial phrase, taken from the Romantic comedy *Ponce de Leon* (1804) by Clemens Brentano (1778–1842).

consuls: the Roman Republic was governed by two consuls, each elected for a year at a time; Lucius Junius Brutus (85–42 BCE), the assassin of Julius Caesar, was one. The consuls in Kessin are local businessmen who act as representatives of foreign countries. Similarly, in Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* (1901) Jean Buddenbrook has the office of Consul and is generally referred to as 'the Consul'.

44 *black-and-white flags*: the Prussian flag showed a black eagle on a white ground; the flag of the German Empire, used from 1871 to 1918, had three horizontal bars, black, white, and red.

49 *Preziosa*: an opera (1820) with text by Pius Alexander Wolff (1782–1828) and music by Carl Maria von Weber (1786–1826).

Fehrbellin: a battle fought on 28 June 1675 in which the Prussian army decisively defended a stronger Swedish force. A member of the Briest family did indeed distinguish himself in the battle. Three days before the battle, a contingent of Prussian troops led by Major-General von Goetze drove the Swedes out of the town of Rathenow which they had occupied.

Froben: a patriotic legend tells how Emanuel von Froben (1640–75), master of the horse under the Elector Friedrich Wilhelm, on learning that the Elector intended to ride into battle at Fehrbellin on a conspicuous white horse, persuaded him to exchange horses and thus saved his monarch's life but lost his own.

Luther: Martin Luther (1483–1546), asked at the Diet of Worms in 1521 to withdraw his criticisms of the Church, is said to have replied: 'Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.'

50 *Borckes*: an actual noble family called Borcke lived near Swinemünde in Fontane's youth.

Grasenabbs: an invented name, based on the actual name Glasenapp, borne by an acquaintance of Fontane; Glasenapp was not pleased to find an unpleasant fictional character with a name so close to his, and Fontane wrote him an apologetic letter.

Güldenklee: the name of an actual family, which, as Fontane knew, was extinct, so that his use of the name could convey authenticity without giving offence.

Crown Princess: Victoria (1840–1901), eldest daughter of Queen Victoria and wife of Prince Friedrich Wilhelm (1831–88), who reigned briefly as the Emperor Friedrich III.

Stiefel von Stiefelstein: an invented name, meant to sound comical; *Stiefel* means 'boot'.

51 *2nd of December*: on 2 December 1851 Louis Napoleon, who affirmed that he was the son of Napoleon Bonaparte's brother Louis, overthrew the French Second Republic and seized power, ruthlessly shooting down the Parisians who

objected, and on 2 December 1852 he proclaimed himself Emperor Napoleon III.

Saarbrücken: in the first skirmish of the Franco-Prussian War the French won a victory at Saarbrücken, for which Napoleon III gave credit to his son Louis; Innstetten mistakenly calls the father, not the son, the conqueror of Saarbrücken. For details, see Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War* (London: Hart-Davis, 1961), 79–85.

Eugénie: the Empress Eugénie (1826–1920), originally the Countess of Montijo and Teja, wife to Napoleon III; she was alleged to have a relationship with the banker Baron Alfons de Rothschild (1827–1905).

52 *Nobiling's attempt*: Karl Eduard Nobiling (1848–78), an anarchist who tried on 2 June 1878 to assassinate Emperor Wilhelm I.

Le Bourget: a town north-east of Paris, captured by the Prussians on 30 October 1870.

boston: a card game resembling whist, popular in nineteenth-century Europe; the players have 'chips' or counters of various sizes and values to keep their score.

53 *Graditzers*: horses from the stud farm at Graditz in Saxony.

54 *Bayreuth*: town in northern Bavaria where the Festspielhaus for the performance of Wagner's music-dramas was completed in 1876.

55 *"white woman"*: the ghost of Countess Kunigunde of Orlamünde, who lived around 1300, is said to have appeared several times in various northern Bavarian mansions.

"maudit château": 'accursed castle'.

58 *Verona*: the northern Italian city which provides the setting for the rivalry between the Capulet and Montague families in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

64 *Mirambo*: an African trader who became rich enough to raise his own army and become king of Urambo (in present-day Tanzania) from 1860 to 1884. Fontane read about him in Henry Morton Stanley's *Through the Dark Continent* (1878).

68 *Viardot*: Pauline Viardot-Garcia (1821–1910), a pianist and opera-singer.

69 *Lissa*: a town now called Leszno and located in central Poland; in Fontane's time it belonged to the Prussian-ruled province of Posen and had three squadrons of a hussar regiment in its garrison.

71 *souls*: before the abolition of serfdom in 1861, Russian landowners counted their wealth by the number of serfs or 'souls' they owned.

72 *Bock & Bote*: a leading music business in Berlin.

Gluck: Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714–87), composer of the opera *Orpheus and Eurydice* (1762).

73 *Orpheus … Chrimhild … Vestal*: *Orpheus* refers to Gluck's opera *Orpheus and Eurydice* (1762); Chrimhild is a leading female character in *The Nibelungs* (1854), an opera by Heinrich Ludwig Dorn (1804–92); the Vestal is a leading figure in the opera *The Vestal Virgin* (1807) by Gaspare Spontini (1774–1851).

"Erlkönig": ballad by Goethe, set to music by Franz Schubert (1797–1828) and Carl Loewe (1796–1869).

Die schöne Müllerin: poem cycle by Wilhelm Müller (1794–1827), set to music by Schubert.

"Die Glocken von Speier": 'The Bells of Speyer', a ballad by Maximilian von Oer (1806–46), set by Loewe.

"Ritter Olaf": a poem by Heinrich Heine (1797–1856), published in his *New Poems* (1844); translated as 'Sir Olaf' in *The Complete Poems of Heinrich Heine: A Modern English Version*, trans. Hal Draper (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 370–2.

Zampa and 'Heideknabe': *Zampa* is an opera (1831) by Louis Joseph Ferdinand Hérold (1791–1833); 'Heideknabe' is a poem by the well-known dramatist Friedrich Hebbel (1813–63), set by Robert Schumann (1810–56).

74 *psychograph*: a device for writing down messages supposedly received at spiritualist seances.

75 *Torquemada*: Tomás de Torquemada (1420–98), Grand Inquisitor of Castile and Aragon.

76 *'Madame … Monsieur le Baron'*: 'Baroness von Innstetten, née von Briest. Arrived safely. Prince K. at the station. More smitten with me than ever. A thousand thanks for your kind welcome. Heartfelt compliments to the Baron.'

81 *Eugen Richter*: Richter (1838–1906) was a liberal politician and a vigorous opponent of Bismarck.

Jewish question: Wagner was an outspoken anti-Semite, most strikingly in his pamphlet *Judaism in Music* (1850).

83 *Wilms*: Robert Friedrich Wilms (1824–80), a distinguished surgeon, whom Fontane knew personally.

Count Gröben: Count Georg von der Gröben (1817–94), a major-general in the Prussian army.

Swedish Pomerania: a territory on the Baltic coast, including the cities of Stralsund, Greifswald, and Stettin (Szczecin) and the island of Rügen, acquired by Sweden in 1630, during the Thirty Years War, and assigned to Prussia by the Congress of Vienna in 1815.

86 *Biliner mineral water*: water from the spa Bilin (now Bílina) in Bohemia.

Bornholm: an island in the Baltic, belonging to Denmark

Visby: Swedish city on the island of Gotland, in medieval times an important commercial town and a member of the Hanseatic League.

Wullenweber: Jürgen Wullenweber (1492–1537), a mayor of Lübeck who led a campaign against the Danes before being captured and executed.

Stockholm Bloodbath: in 1520 King Christian II of Denmark regained control of Sweden and executed over 600 opponents of Danish rule.

88 *Eichsfeld*: a strongly Catholic district in Thuringia in southern Germany.

Giebichenstein: a village near Halle in Saxony.

90 *Reeperbahn*: literally 'street of rope-makers', but it is difficult now not to associate the name with the Reeperbahn, a well-known red-light district, in Hamburg.

91 *Battle of Königgrätz*: the decisive Prussian victory in the Austro-Prussian War of 1866.

92 *Napoleon's birthday*: the birthday of Napoleon Bonaparte in 1769.

Bible: Sidonie is thinking of Revelation 3: 16: 'So because thou art lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spew thee out of my mouth.'

rock of St Peter … rocher de bronze: Jesus' words to Peter, 'thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church' (Matthew 16: 18), have traditionally been interpreted as founding either the Christian Church generally, or (as here) the Roman Catholic Church specifically. King Friedrich Wilhelm I of Prussia, receiving a petition in 1716, wrote in the margin, in a mixture of German and French, 'I will make sovereignty as stable as a rock of bronze (*rocher von bronze*)'. The 'rock' here refers to Bismarck.

Justizrat: title given to a senior judge.

94 *Blücher*: Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher (1742–1819), the Prussian commander at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815.

98 *Heinersdorf*: Günther Schulz von Heinersdorf, a multi-millionaire and owner of several landed estates.

Pluto: the god of the underworld, but here seemingly confused with Plutus, the god of wealth.

Chinese dragon: in the late 1870s China was at war with Japan and Russia with Turkey.

Vionville: a town near Metz in north-eastern France where the Prussian army defeated the French on 16 August 1870.

100 *War in Peace … Euphrosyne*: *War in Peace*, a comedy (1881) by Gustav von Moser (1825–1903) and Franz von Schönthan (1849–1913); *Monsieur Hercules*: a farce (1863) by Georg Belly (1836–75); *Youthful Love*: a comedy (1871) by Adolf Wilbrandt (1837–1911); *Euphrosyne* (1877), a play by Otto Franz Gensichen (1847–1933). 'Euphrosyne' is an elegy by Goethe, written in 1797–8 to mourn the death of the nineteen-year-old actress Christiane Becker.

Castalian spring: a spring at the foot of Mt Parnassus, symbolizing poetic inspiration.

104 *Liancourt … Beauvais*: northern French towns occupied by Prussian forces during the Franco-Prussian War. The bishop of Beauvais who condemned Joan of Arc in 1431was not called 'cochon' (= 'pig') but Cauchon.

106 *Basedow*: Johann Bernhard Basedow (1723–90), a prominent educationalist, who founded a progressive school called the Philanthropinum.

Pestalozzi: Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827), a Swiss educational reformer.

Schnepfenthal or Bunzlau: Christian educational institutions.

cherub with the flaming sword: alluding to the angelic guardian placed by God to prevent Adam and Eve from re-entering the Garden of Eden after the Fall (Genesis 3: 24).

108 *Vineta*: a mythical sunken city, supposed to be situated somewhere in the southern Baltic and to become visible at certain times; the Swedish author Selma Lagerlöf retells the story in *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* (1906–7).

Heine's poem: the poem 'Seegespenst' (1827), translated as 'Sea Apparition' in Draper, *The Complete Poems of Heinrich Heine*, 141–3.

109 *Charles Stuart*: Crampas is confusing Heine's poem 'Charles I' from *Romanzero* (1851) with another about Marie Antoinette which follows it in the collection. See Draper, *The Complete Poems of Heinrich Heine*, 575–7.

Vitzliputzli: a gruesome poem by Heine, also from *Romanzero*, about Spanish captives being sacrificed to the Aztec deity Huitzlipochtli. See Draper, *The Complete Poems of Heinrich Heine*, 599–614.

110 *Pedro the Cruel*: the story Crampas now tells comes from Heine's poem 'Spanish Atrides' in *Romanzero*. See Draper, *The Complete Poems of Heinrich Heine*, 619–26.

111 *Elizabeth's mother*: Anne Boleyn (1507–36), the second wife of Henry VIII. Fontane usually spells the name 'Bulen', which makes it look and sound like 'Buhle', an illicit lover.

Black Eagle and the Pour le Mérite: high-ranking Prussian decorations, founded respectively by Friedrich I, to mark his coronation in 1701, and Friedrich II, to mark his accession in 1740.

112 *King of Thule*: in Goethe's ballad 'Der König in Thule', from *Faust, Part I*, the King is deeply attached to a goblet which was a present from his deceased lover.

113 *Friedrichsruh*: Bismarck's residence near Hamburg.

114 *'Buhküken von Halberstadt'*: a nursery-rhyme about the medieval Bishop Burkhard or Buko of Halberstadt (1009–56), who was famous for being fond of children.

One False Step: a comedy (*Ein Schritt vom Wege*, 1873) by Ernst Wichert (1831–1902). Although the title sounds ominous, it refers only to the decision of Ella von Schmettwitz, a newly-wed woman already bored with her conventional husband Arthur, that they should both depart from the norm by concealing their identity for three days while staying in a spa. As the local Prince is present incognito, and is said to have a liaison with an opera singer, much comic confusion of identity results.

115 *Kammergerichtsrat*: Ernst Wichert was born in Insterburg in East Prussia and studied at Königsberg (both now in Russia, the latter known as Kaliningrad), before becoming a judge, first in Königsberg, later attached to the supreme court (Kammergericht) in Berlin. Innstetten alludes to the oddity of a judge writing a comedy and also to the incongruity of Königsberg's association both with Wichert's comedy and the rigorous moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804).

seven charms: 'Every woman has seven charms' or 'seven beauties' is a common German saying.

119 *Wrangel and Bonin*: for Wrangel see note to p. 42. Eduard von Bonin (1793–1865) commanded a Prussian brigade in Schleswig-Holstein in 1848.

Danewerk: (Dan. *Danevirke*), a fortification intended to secure Schleswig from German attack, which fell to the Prussian army on 23 April 1848.

120 *"God's Wall"*: a poem ('Die Gottesmauer') written in 1816 by Clemens Brentano (1778–1842); the event, accurately reported by Effi, takes place during an earlier war in Schleswig.

121 *Marienburg Castle*: a fortress of the medieval Teutonic Knights, situated in northern Poland, some thirty miles west of Danzig (Gdańsk), and known in Polish as Malbork.

Memling: Hans Memling (*c*.1430/40–94), painted an altar-piece, *The Last Judgement*, which was captured at sea in 1463, taken to Danzig, and displayed there in St Mary's Church.

Oliva Abbey: a Cistercian monastery founded about 1278 near Danzig.

Nettelbeck: Joachim Nettelbeck (1738–1824) helped to defend the Pomeranian town of Kolberg (Polish Kołobrzeg) when it was besieged by Napoleon's troops in 1806–7.

122 *The flesh is weak*: Matthew 26: 41.

saga in Sweden: Sigurd Ring was a legendary Swedish king mentioned in many sagas.

Köslin: (Polish Koszalin), a town in Pomerania, some miles east of Swinemünde.

Cassandra-like: in Greek legend Cassandra was a daughter of Priam, king of Troy; Apollo gave her the gift of prophecy but ordained that her prophecies would not be believed.

123 *three rings*: in the Enlightenment drama *Nathan the Wise* (1779) by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–81), the wise Jew Nathan, asked by the Sultan Saladin which of the three Abrahamic religions is the true one, tells how in ancient times a man had a ring which made its possessor beloved of God and man; he bequeathed a ring to each of his sons; wanting to know which was the genuine ring, they consulted a judge who told them to pursue active virtue and piety and thus make themselves beloved. The parable is famous as a plea for religious toleration.

'A Prussian I am … I will be': a patriotic song, often regarded as a Prussian national anthem and referred to as the 'Preussenlied', written in 1830 by Bernhard Thiersch (1794–1855).

132 *Radegast and Swantowit*: names of gods supposedly worshipped by the Wends, the first symbolizing reason, the second victory. Fontane discusses the Wendish pantheon in *Wanderings Through the March of Brandenburg*, ii. 28.

Table Talk: the sayings of Martin Luther (1483–1546), both serious and jocular, were collected and published in 1566.

138 *Blücher's Hussars*: a Pomeranian regiment, named after the Prussian victor at Waterloo.

Sanssouci: it was common for German embassies abroad to give presents in the form of china from the royal manufactory in Berlin, with pictures of the palaces in Potsdam. Sanssouci was built for Frederick the Great in 1745–7, the New Palace in 1763–9.

144 *Dressel's*: a smart restaurant in Berlin at Unter den Linden 50.

145 *Palazzo Strozzi or Pitti*: palaces in Florence.

154 *Dorotheenstrasse … Schadowstrasse*: streets in the centre of Berlin, close to Unter den Linden.

155 *Kladderadatsch*: a humorous weekly, founded in 1848, whose comic characters included Strudelwitz, Prudelwitz, and Karlchen ('Charlie') Miessnick.

Wippchen von Bernau: a comic character from another periodical, *The Wasps*.

156 *Book of Job*: this quotation appears to be Fontane's invention. The original joke asks: 'Who was the first coachman?' and the untranslatable answer is 'Sorrow' because of the pseudo-biblical sentence 'Leid soll mir nicht widerfahren', 'Sorrow shall not afflict me' or 'Sorrow shall not drive me again'.

159 *Walter Scott … Herr von Bredow's Trousers*: *Walter Scott*, the Scottish historical novelist (1771–1832), whose work was also hugely popular on the Continent and inspired Fontane's first novel, *Before the Storm* (1878). *Ivanhoe* (1819) is set in medieval England, *Quentin Durward* (1823) in fifteenth-century France. *Cooper*: James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851), whose adventure novels include *The Spy* (1821), set during the American Revolution. *Dickens*: *David Copperfield* (1850) by Charles Dickens (1812–70). Effi's tastes in fiction are quite conventional. *Willibald Alexis*: the pseudonym of Wilhelm Häring (1798–1871), who wrote novels inspired by Scott on Prussian history. *Herr von Bredow's Trousers*

(1846–8), set in sixteenth-century Brandenburg, is his best-known work.

165 *Red Castle*: not actually a castle, but an imposing building containing shops.

166 *Charlottenburg Palace*: a palace built in 1699 for the Elector Friedrich, who in 1701 assumed the title King Friedrich I.

167 *Oberammergau Passion Play*: a drama about the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus, performed every ten years to commemorate deliverance from the plague in 1634.

Stralsund: an important and historic city on the coast of the present German province of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, the normal departure-point for visits to the island of Rügen.

Schill: Ferdinand von Schill (1776–1809), who led an unsuccessful uprising against Napoleon but was killed in street-fighting in Stralsund. He is famous for saying to his followers: 'Better an end with horror than a horror without end,' which has become proverbial.

Scheele: Karl Wilhelm Scheele (1742–86), born in Stralsund; the priority in discovering oxygen is disputed between him and the English scientist Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), who made the discovery three years later but published it before Scheele did.

168 *Fahrenheit*: the hotel in Sassnitz was actually called the Hotel zum Fahrnberg; Fontane changed the name for the sake of the joke (letter to Friedlaender, 29 August 1894).

'Crampas': a fishing village on Rügen, merged in 1906 with the village of Sassnitz.

169 *sacrificial altar*: there are photographs of these stones in James N. Bade, *Fontane's Landscapes* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2009), 139.

170 *Kongens Nytorv*: the largest square in the centre of Copenhagen; literally 'King's New Market'.

Thorvaldsen: the Danish neoclassical sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770–1844).

Penz: a family with many branches in Germany and Denmark; it is the name of a prominent character in Fontane's novel *No Way Back* (1891), set in Denmark.

171 *Frederiksborg and Elsinore*: Frederiksborg is a palace built for King Christian IV of Denmark between 1602 and 1620; Elsinore (Dan. Helsingør) is a town north-east of Copenhagen with a castle, Kronborg, which forms the setting of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

174 *Genthin*: a town in Saxony-Anhalt, south-west of Brandenburg and hence a long way away.

Friesack: a town in the Havelland, therefore near Hohen-Cremmen.

175 *Düppel*: the site of the main Danish entrenchments in the Dano-Prussian War; their capture by Prussian troops on 18 April 1864 was the turning-point in the war.

Lipa: a hill captured by the Prussian Guards during the Battle of Königgrätz in the Austro-Prussian War of 1866.

177 *Landesgerichtsrat*: a judge attached to the district court.

178 *Posen Province*: the province (Polish Poznań) acquired by Prussia in the Second Partition of Poland in 1793.

Barbarossa: the nickname ('Redbeard') of the German Emperor Friedrich I (1125–90).

179 *a Christian one*: alluding to the prominence of Jewish bankers in Berlin, the best-known being Bismarck's banker Gerson Bleichröder, to whom Fontane alludes in the novel *The Poggenpuhl Family* (1896).

Almanach de Gotha: the standard handbook of the European nobility.

Bad Schwalbach: a spa in the Taunus hills, near Frankfurt am Main.

Ems: another spa, in the Rhineland near Koblenz. It was from here that Emperor Wilhelm I sent the Ems Telegram which triggered the Franco-Prussian War.

181 *Nana*: novel (1880) by Émile Zola (1840–1902), telling the life-story of a courtesan.

'the unvarying hour of duty': a quotation from Schiller's *The Piccolomini*, Act I, scene 4.

"Let me have men about me that are fat": from Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, I. ii. 192.

200 *Niemann as Tannhäuser*: Albert Niemann (1831–1917) was a well-known opera singer who had sung the title role in the Paris première of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* in 1861.

202 *Saatwinkel*: a village on the north-west side of Berlin, a popular spot for trips to the country. Before the days of motor traffic the coachmen of Berlin assembled here twice a year to enjoy themselves in the local pubs and restaurants. It may be its reputation for festivities like these that makes the Geheimrätin disapprove of her husband's trips to Saatwinkel.

203 *Saturn devours his own children*: the Roman god Saturnus was identified with the Greek Kronos, who devoured his own children until Zeus killed him and freed the rest from his stomach. During the French Revolution Saturn was used to symbolize revolutionary violence. Cf. Georg Büchner, *Danton's Death* (written 1834), Act I, scene 5: 'the revolution is like Saturn, it devours its own children.'

208 *Königgrätzerstrasse*: a modest location, named after the decisive battle of the Austro-Prussian War; since renamed the Stresemannstrasse.

209 *Prince Albrecht's Palace*: the residence of Prince Albrecht of Prussia (1837–1906), a general, related to the royal family by being the grandson of King Friedrich Wilhelm III (reigned 1797–1940).

Kreuzberg: an area on the south side of Berlin which was landscaped between 1888 and 1894.

211 *Glatz*: a town in Silesia (the province south-east of Prussia, conquered by Frederick the Great in the 1740s), now Kłodzko in south-western Poland. It has a fortress where Innstetten has been confined as a token punishment for killing his opponent in the duel.

217 *Guido Reni*: Italian painter (1575–1642).

Benjamin West: English painter of historical scenes (1738–1820).

King Lear: see Shakespeare, *King Lear*, III. ii.

221 *Schilling's*: a cake-shop on the Friedrichstrasse, hence in the smart central area of Berlin that Effi used to visit in happier times.

Körner: Karl Theodor Körner (1791–1813), famous for his patriotic poems and for his death in the war against Napoleon's troops.

226 *Arkona*: one of the ancient centres of the Wendish religion. For an account of the German crusade against Wendish paganism, see Richard Fletcher, *The Conversion of Europe: From Paganism to Christianity 371–1386 AD (*London: HarperCollins, 1997), 435–50.

228 *Lethe*: according to Greek mythology, a river in the underworld whose water induced forgetfulness.

229 *Kreuzzeitung … Norddeutsche Allgemeine*: conservative newspapers. The *Neue Preussische Zeitung* (New Prussian Newspaper) was known colloquially by the Iron Cross (*Kreuz*) which formed its emblem. Fontane was its correspondent on British affairs from 1856 to 1870. The *Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* (North German General Newspaper) was understood to express Bismarck's policies.

230 *Ladenberg, who had been a minister*: Philipp von Ladenberg (1796–1847), who was annoyed at receiving only the inferior decoration.

232 *Wichern:* Johann Hinrich Wichern (1808–81), a theologian who in 1833 founded the Rauhes Haus, an asylum for the mentally ill, in Hamburg.

Mutesa: Mutesa I (1837–84), king of Buganda, in present-day Uganda.

Cameroons: present-day Cameroon in West Africa; it became a German colony in 1884.

233 *Emperor Friedrich*: Friedrich III (1831–88) reigned for only ninety-nine days before dying of cancer of the throat on 15 June 1888. This reference shows that we are now in the 'Year of Three Emperors': Wilhelm I had died on 9 March; Wilhelm II ascended the throne immediately on Friedrich's death.

Sardanapalus … Coppélia … Antonietta dell'Era: *Sardanapalus* is a ballet by Paul Taglioni (1808–84), director of the Berlin Ballet; *Coppélia*, a ballet (1870) by Léo Delibes (1836–91); Antonietta dell'Era was a famous ballerina (1860–1945?), a favourite with Berlin audiences.

Duke of Ratibor: Viktor, Duke of Ratibor (1818–93), a prominent conservative politician.

Prince-Bishop Kopp: Georg Kopp (1837–1914), Prince-Bishop of Breslau, who played a mediating role in Bismarck's conflict with the Catholic Church in the 1870s.

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THEODOR FONTANE

Effi Briest

Introducción de THOMAS MANN

El ambiente plúmbeo y la rigidez moral que caracterizan a la aristocracia prusiana no logran someter la vitalidad de la joven Effi Briest, que cede a la tentación del adulterio sabiendo perdida su oportunidad de ser feliz. Su marido, el barón Von Innstetten, no se siente especialmente ofendido, pero no tendrá más remedio que hacer valer su autoridad por la presión de las normas sociales. Theodor Fontane se basó en un hecho real para retratar los conflictos de la recién creada nación alemana, tan dispuesta como reacia a asumir los nuevos modelos de subjetividad y progreso.

Este volumen recoge la fiel y canónica traducción que en su día realizara
F. de Ocampo
. Asimismo, al texto de Fontane lo precede la formidable introducción firmada por el Premio Nobel de Literatura Thomas Mann, declarado admirador de la obra del máximo representante del realismo alemán.

Theodor Fontane

Effi Briest

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Introducción

El viejo Fontane

Se ha publicado un nuevo volumen de cartas de Theodor Fontane, una verdadera delicia. Hasta ahora sólo contábamos con dos volúmenes con las cartas a su familia y con dos más de cartas a sus amigos. ¿Es que queda algún otro? ¡Entonces, tiene que publicarse! Y en especial el testimonio de la época más tardía, las cartas del viejo Fontane. En comparación con ellas, las del Fontane joven o de mediana edad tienen poca importancia. ¿No da la sensación de que estuviera obligado a envejecer, y mucho, para llegar a ser él mismo? Del mismo modo que hay jovenzuelos que alcanzan la plenitud muy temprano y nunca maduran, por no hablar de viejos que no sobreviven ni a ellos mismos, también es evidente que existen naturalezas para las que la vejez es la única edad, ancianos clásicos, por decirlo así, llamados a abrir los ojos de la humanidad a las enormes ventajas de esa etapa vital, como la ternura, la bondad, la justicia, el humor y una taimada sabiduría, en definitiva, el más alto retorno a la inocencia y la libertad de la niñez. Él era uno de estos, y parece que, consciente de ello, hubiera tenido prisa por envejecer, para poder ser mayor durante mucho tiempo. En 1856, a los treinta y siete años, escribe a su mujer: «Me doy cuenta de que envejezco porque comienzo a encontrarle el gusto a la música. La música y la belleza de las líneas de una estatua comienzan a sentarme bien. Los sentidos se me agudizan, y la primera regla del deleite es ahora: ¡Nada de esfuerzos! Durante la juventud todo eso es diferente». Veintitrés años después escribe a su editor Hertz: «Acabo de comenzar. Aún no he vivido nada, sino que todo queda ante mí, lo cual es al tiempo suerte y desgracia. También desgracia. Porque no tiene nada de agradable aparecer como un "pequeño doctor" a los cincuenta y nueve». Catorce años después escribió su obra maestra…

Contemplemos sus retratos: el del joven del primer volumen de las cartas a sus amigos, junto al retrato más tardío que adorna los volúmenes póstumos. Uno compara el semblante pálido, enfermizo, soñador y algo soso de aquel entonces con la anciana testa de semblante firme, orgulloso, amable y alegre, en cuya boca desdentada, tras un mostacho canoso, asoma una sonrisa de alegría racionalista, como se puede encontrar en ciertos retratos de veteranos del siglo XVIII, y no quedará ya ninguna duda de cuándo este hombre y su genio alcanzaron su punto más álgido, de cuándo vivió su plenitud personal.

Esta imagen muestra al Fontane de las obras y las cartas, al viejo Briest, al viejo Stechlin, muestra al Fontane inmortal. Porque el mortal, según lo que llega a nuestros oídos, sufrió de muchas carencias y decepcionó a la gente con frecuencia. Tiene setenta años cuando habla a su hija de la fuerza y la frescura, que van más unidas a la diversión que al trabajo, y confiesa que la pregunta «¿Qué estupidez es esa?» amenaza con apoderarse completamente de él. Presume de que pudo experimentar aquella clase de frescura en alguna ocasión, y simplemente olvidó que el arisco quietismo de la «famosa pregunta» le ha obsesionado siempre de uno u otro modo. «Para divertirse aquí —escribe en París cuando tiene treinta y siete años—, se necesita una suerte de buenas y malas cualidades, y yo carezco de ambas. Para empezar es necesario hablar francés, y esa es una enorme virtud que me falta. Además, uno debe ser libertino y un habitual de los juegos de azar, ir detrás de las muchachas, tener *rendezvous*, fumar tabaco turco, saber manejar el taco de billar y muchas otras cosas. El que no tenga ni sepa nada de todo eso, es un sujeto perdido y hace muy bien en preparar las maletas cuando haya desvelado toda esta farsa, y sus visitas artísticas al Louvre y Versalles hayan terminado». Esta es una afirmación muy huraña para un hombre en la flor de la vida y que siente París por primera vez. Pero es también la expresión de alguien con la mente abrumada por una existencia absorbida por la obligación de producir, y que necesariamente se comporta de forma huraña e irascible por puro placer. Es la expresión de determinada producción magistral, sin duda inmortal y demasiado tardía, de creación maltratada por los nervios, para la que la juventud no era una condición adecuada y cuya armonía

sólo pudo alcanzarse en la vejez, cuando nadie, ni uno mismo, nos exige «frescura», y la pregunta «¿Qué estupidez es esa?» forma parte de un estado de ánimo natural, permitido por todos y que por ello resulta simpático.

Su naturaleza nerviosa guarda cierto parecido con la de Wagner, el cual podía ser verdaderamente inquieto hasta límites insospechados, y en cuya larga y productiva trayectoria creadora, el sentimiento de satisfacción pareció ser sólo una excepción: obtuso, melancólico, insomne, torturado en general, se encuentra a los treinta años en un estado anímico que le hace derrumbarse a menudo y llorar durante un cuarto de hora seguido. Teme morir antes de concluir su *Tannhäuser* y a los treinta y cinco años se considera demasiado viejo para lanzarse a la creación del proyecto de los Nibelungos; siempre agotado, «acabado» a cada momento, a los cuarenta «piensa a diario en la muerte» y, sin embargo, cerca de los setenta escribirá el *Parsifal*. La diferencia de sus temperamentos es notable, y en el caso de Fontane todo es más frío y mesurado. Pero sus cartas dan muestra de cuán rápido se agotaba y de su angustia interior. Aparentemente, no confió en alcanzar nunca el éxito. Si a los treinta y siete se siente viejo, a los cincuenta y siete ya percibe que ha llegado al final del camino. Ha alcanzado ya «todo lo terrenal: el amor, el matrimonio, la descendencia, dos distinciones con sendas órdenes y una reseña en la enciclopedia Brockhaus. Sólo faltan dos cosas: el Consejo Privado y la muerte. De la segunda estoy seguro, y al primero renuncio de todos modos». Dos años después tuvo un disgusto en el teatro, «básicamente fue una nimiedad, y aun así, que me dejaran en la estacada durante un cuarto de hora fue algo que me superó. El corazón se me disparó de forma desbocada, y en la cadera me entró un terrible dolor… yo siempre estaba nervioso, pero nunca lo había estado tanto. Y entonces me repetí: "¿Qué más se puede pedir? Ya lo he vivido todo, y la mayoría de los de cincuenta y ocho años tienen otros achaques"». A él, que sufre de achaques, que ya lo ha vivido todo, aún le quedaban por ofrecer dieciocho publicaciones, cada una de las cuales es mejor que la anterior, hasta llegar a *Effi Briest*.

En una carta de los años setenta, Fontane intenta disculpar la crispación y disgusto con su esposa en un conflicto matrimonial. «Cuando no llego a ninguna parte en medio de un trabajo —escribe—, o me domina un sentimiento de fracaso, se me encoge el ánimo de tal manera, que soy incapaz de ser amable, dispuesto, tolerante ni cariñoso». Pero él ha sido de aquellos cuya obra crece hasta niveles heroicos, precisamente porque nunca pretende llegar a ninguna parte, de aquellos que alcanzan la perfección porque siempre les domina el sentimiento de fracaso. Sus cartas son tan cariñosas que no me he cruzado nunca con nadie a quien haya conocido en persona y al que haya encontrado tan amable, dispuesto, tolerante y cariñoso. Uno lo recuerda como uno de esos señores mayores «sentimentaloides» cuya desbordante ansia creativa nunca se hizo notar demasiado. Una mujer a la que conocí en unos baños termales me explicaba que, a la pregunta sobre cómo le había ido el trabajo aquel día, él respondía: «Mal, por Dios. He estado sentado bajo la pérgola durante hora y media y no se me ha ocurrido nada, y justo cuando parecía que algo comenzaba a brotar, en ese preciso momento, llegaron los críos alborotando, y se acabó por hoy». La dama se expresó de forma despectiva respecto a ese tipo de vis poética. Cuando está claro que alguien tiene talento, afirmaba, y se dedica profesionalmente al ejercicio de la escritura, una confesión tal es simplemente vergonzosa. Probablemente el viejo de Fontane le hubiese dado en parte la razón, porque era un hombre humilde, y se tenía por digno, aunque nada especial, y si bien para su época y por sus dotes fue un miembro de la progenie de héroes europeos, a la que pertenecieron Bismarck, Molkte, Guillermo I, Helmholtz, Wagner, Menzel, Zola, Ibsen y Tolstói, no sufría del típico exceso de solemnidad, de tener una visión de sí mismo desde la óptica de la eternidad, ni de la soberbia que desquició a la frágil generación del 1870.

La expresión «fina lluvia» ya aparece en una de las cartas de los años cincuenta: «Soy ciertamente de naturaleza poética, más que muchísimos otros que se adornan como tales, pero no soy un poeta nato de grandeza ni riqueza creativa. La poesía cae sobre mí como una fina lluvia». Y de esta forma se refiere siempre a sí mismo, sin falsa modestia, reposado, austero hasta la resignación, y coherente con el tono con el que, en diciembre de 1885, en las escaleras de Sanssouci, el espectral anciano, apoyado en su bastón, tuvo que escuchar sobre la obra del poeta alemán:

«¿Y su profesión?».
«Escritor, Majestad: hago versos».
El rey rio: «¡Escuchad eso!
Quiero creerle, nadie es tan necio
de llamarse poeta sin tener que hacerlo.
Sólo afirma tal cosa quien debe afirmarla.
Porque, si no, no se oirá otra cosa más que burla.

Poète allemand!…».

En algún pasaje de sus cartas se dice lo mismo en prosa: «Siempre la misma historia: el que haya de ser escritor a toda costa, lo será; acabará encontrando su felicidad y consuelo en el lugar que más le convenga. Si, por el contrario, no ha nacido para ello, acabará por dejarlo». Esa es una buena frase para un libro de máximas para gente joven que quiera averiguar si tiene «talento», para todos los del mismo cuño que el viejo Wechsler, que fue enterrado en julio del 93 y que escribía sobre el Fontane de las cartas a Julius Rodenberg: «Esa clase de existencia me provoca siempre una trágica impresión, pero el sentimiento tampoco es destilado. Se mezcla con muchas otras sensaciones: "¿Por qué no se dedicarán los memos a quedarse detrás del mostrador?" y otras por el estilo. Suena duro, en especial viniendo de alguien que sí se quedó detrás del mostrador. Y vaya si tengo razón». Alguien de sentimientos tan raquíticos debe de estar muy seguro de su obra, aunque sólo surja de una «fina lluvia», cuando renunció al mostrador de la farmacia Roseschen. ¿O quizá lo hizo como todos nosotros, quienes, en busca del éxito o el fracaso, o puede que ambos a la vez, renunciamos a algún mostrador y nos entregamos al genio y la palabra, como los jóvenes conjuraban antiguamente su éxito a una piel de cordero, por indolencia, imprudencia e incapacidad burguesa? Él sabía, de todas formas, que «ya era alguien cuando encabezaba la marcha hacia determinados terrenos (la balada)», y muchos le consideraban y hablaban de él como él lo hacía sobre el pobre Wechsler.

Su vida, una vida sin brillo y afligida, queda esbozada de soslayo en sus cartas. «Llegué a este mundo sin patrimonio, legado familiar, formación ni conocimientos, sin precisamente la salud de un roble, acompañado sólo de talento poético y unos pantalones de un corte horrible. (Hacían bolsas a la altura de las rodillas). Y ahora imaginen cómo me puede haber ido con semejante espíritu de fatalidad. Tenía además cierto espíritu de rigor prusiano, el cual es mucho peor que el propio espíritu de fatalidad. Naturalmente que también hubo buenos momentos, momentos de satisfacción, de esperanza y de un crecer en la conciencia de mí mismo. Pero en conjunto tengo que decir que sólo he estado expuesto a la humillación, la duda, la indiferencia y la mofa… no obstante, lo que no puedo afirmar es que lo haya aceptado todo con resignación. Lo he sufrido, pero puedo mantener también que tampoco lo he sufrido demasiado. Y ello se debe a que poseo un sentido muy firme de la realidad. Siempre me he tomado la vida tal como venía y me he conformado con ella, pero siempre de puertas afuera; nunca en mi interior». Y continúa hablando de la realidad de Prusia, similar a la de muchos otros lugares, y de sus poderes establecidos, a los cuales se sometió, incluso también cuando algo tarde, cerca de su final, comenzaron a mostrar un poco de clemencia con él. Se doctoró, recibió una orden honorífica, y a pesar de ello considera que «Las condecoraciones sirven para los otros (…) si fuera un hombre apreciado socialmente, objeto de homenajes o simplemente respeto (…), una distinción tal significaría para mí poco menos que nada. Pero a la vista del hecho de que en Alemania y especialmente en Prusia sólo se tiene algún valor cuando uno tiene la "aprobación pública", una orden como esa tiene valor práctico: a uno se le mira con mayor respeto y recibe mejor trato. Bendito sea Gossler, que me "puso en la lista"». Goethe se expresó contra Eckermann de forma similar respecto a las órdenes y títulos («paran algún que otro golpe»), y este sencillo razonamiento encierra mucho del pensamiento alemán, mucho realismo bismarquiano y diferenciación kantiana de razón pura y práctica. En su interior, él se sabía no sólo independiente de los «poderes establecidos», sino que consideraba estúpido, y más en el caso de las personas, contar con su ovación, aprobación y honores, como si sirvieran de algo. «Debemos —afirmaba— llenar nuestra alma exclusivamente con el trabajo y la tarea de encontrarnos a nosotros mismos, y no con la devoción a la futilidad de esas cosas». En lo que respecta a la riqueza, la infravaloraba como camino hacia la felicidad, hasta en ocasiones provocarle lástima. «Allí donde hay dinero, siempre merodea un fantasma. La frase "Cuanto más viejo soy, más profundo siento", debería rezar "más diáfana veo la maldición del oro". Parece casi voluntad divina que el hombre deba ganarse el pan de cada día; el ministro, por supuesto, de otro modo que el jornalero, pero siempre con el trabajo y su correspondiente salario. Una herencia millonaria es sólo fuente de desgracias, y hasta los filántropos adinerados son desdichados, porque el estudio de la infamia e ingratitud humanas acaba con su voluntad». En definitiva: en su relación con las grandes fortunas no sintió ninguna envidia ni desprecio. Cuando expresó su acuerdo con la frase de Silvio Pellico en la que se afirma que el lugar más adecuado para formar el espíritu humano es aquel que se encuentra entre la riqueza y la pobreza, y que hace que sea más sencillo conocer ambos extremos, se impuso también sobre él su sentido poético de la grandeza, como en el caso de Heine con los Rothschild, y la admiración estética hacia una magnífica riqueza. «La auténtica riqueza —escribió a su hija— me infunde respeto, o al menos me provoca alegría. Sus formas de manifestarse me despiertan la mayor simpatía, y me encuentro a gusto entre personas que dan empleo a cinco mil mineros,

fundan ciudades industriales y envían expediciones a la colonización de África. Cuentan con mi seguro homenaje grandes armadores, que contratan tripulaciones, constructores de túneles y canales que conectan lugares en la tierra, príncipes de los periódicos y reyes del ferrocarril. No quiero otra cosa de ellos sino verles crear y actuar: eso me sienta bien. Desde que era joven, todo lo grande ha tenido una mágica influencia sobre mí, a la que me someto sin recelo». Lo que sí despreciaba era la burguesía «miserable», que se creía aún mejor que su propia miseria. «Un pedazo de pan —decía— nunca será miserable. Un pedazo de pan es lo más grande, es vida y poesía. Pero un banquete de ganso asado, con un vino de la rivera del Mosel a su paso por Zeltingen y una tarta de merengue, cuando la anfitriona resplandece de soberbia, es en sí mismo miserable y más cuando le acompaña el sentimiento de haberle arrancado a uno de la rutina de su ser durante dos horas». Se le ha tachado de provinciano, como él mismo lo ha hecho también en alguna ocasión. Pero Fontane estaba muy persuadido de la trivialidad de todo lo mediocre y veía en la pobreza, si no una condición, sí el amparo a la visible y carente de ataduras libertad del artista. «Echo la vista atrás —escribe en 1883 en Norderney— y mi vida se parece mucho a la que viví en Londres hace treinta y un años. Caminaba extasiado de Hyde a Regents Park, me paraba cautivado en Richmond Hill y contemplaba florecer los espinos; el aire que respiraba, las escenas de riqueza que veía, todo me hacía sentir bien, pero me movía como un extraño o como si no tuviera todo el derecho a pasar por delante de aquellas joyas. Me había colado sin pagar en aquel espectáculo. Y lo mismo me sucede ahora. Por suerte, el cielo hace justicia y los ciegos pueden ver con las yemas de sus dedos. Siento que casi vale más observar las cosas que poseerlas, y así es como al parecer se consigue finalmente el fruto de la alegría y la felicidad, como un privilegiado».

No obstante: ¡cuán obsoleta y del anticuado estilo de Franconia nos parece hoy esta vida de estrechez y apariencia de pequeño burgués con su pobre lealtad! Los tiempos han cambiado, los poderes de la decencia, llamados «destructivos», avanzan en una marcha victoriosa contra los «establecidos», y el rango del arte y valor del espíritu se han elevado en tal grado, que la sumisión de Fontane nos parece ahora raquítica. ¿Qué son para nosotros las órdenes y los títulos? ¿Quién los quiere para ganarse el respeto? La consideración social de los intelectuales, de los «no elegidos» para las distinciones ha mejorado visiblemente. «¿No va a haber ningún necio que se vanaglorie de ello sin necesidad?». Recientemente en Munich fue detenido un estafador que se había registrado en el libro de un hotel aristocrático como «escritor». No se puede pedir más…

Pero la humildad de Fontane tenía raíces más profundas que sólo lo social. Fue producto de aquel escepticismo artístico dirigido contra el arte y todo el gremio de artistas, y del que se puede afirmar que afectó a toda la dignidad del gremio. No deja de ser cómico, con un asomo de coquetería, que en su setenta cumpleaños escuchara de la gente «Es una auténtica lástima que no haya ido a la universidad», o que se negara a ir a Weimar para la inauguración de los archivos de Goethe y Schiller, porque corría demasiado peligro de que se dirigieran a él utilizando citas en latín «o incluso en griego», o de que le trataran de tú a tú, situación en la que siempre pensaba: «¡Tierra, trágame!». Y surge de lo más sincero de su corazón cuando a los setenta y nueve años decide escribir a un crítico: «Estoy muy agradecido por su consejo de enfrentarme a la gente, y también a mí mismo. Si hubiera hecho lo que deseaba, entonces me habría perjudicado de otra forma. Porque en medio de la vanidad de la que uno no se puede librar, se llega a un momento en el que uno termina por verse como algo muy incierto: “Thou comest in such a questionable shape”». Y guarda relación con su sentido ciudadano de la disciplina y el orden, incluso aún más con aquel honrado racionalismo del que quienes entre los artistas son sacerdotes, ceremoniosos y embusteros no quieren saber nada. Él sentía la sospecha que recaía sobre los artistas, ese cruce entre Lucifer y payaso, y a excepción de él, casi nadie más la sentía. La impaciente vehemencia de este sentimiento se podía notar en la siguiente crítica del novelista Spielhagen: «Siempre existe la impresión de que los poetas, pintores u otros artistas son algo especial, mientras la mayoría de la sociedad (y así ha sido siempre) se sitúa en el nivel más inferior, tan bajo que casi todo le queda por encima. Sólo se dan contadas excepciones a esta regla, por ejemplo Scott; sin embargo, Byron vuelve a ser espantoso. Cuando se trata de auténticos artistas, se ha de mostrar indulgencia con ellos y no tomarlos demasiado en serio. Ahora bien, festejar su mezcla de estupidez, relajación de costumbres y arrogancia me resulta ya desagradable. La sola expresión “Mi arte es sagrado para mí” (en el caso concreto de las actrices) acaba conmigo». Magda Schwarze estaba por entonces aún en el conservatorio, pero ¿no suena como si se hubiese extraído la cita de *La Gaya Ciencia*? Y del estilo son las reflexiones del Rubek de los sesenta acerca de la contraposición del arte y la vida, las prioridades y la superioridad de una vida mediocre y amable. «Ah —escribe—, qué privilegiados los tenientes y terratenientes de seis pies de altura, y todos los otros de la familia Don Juan. Y vaya si retiro todo lo que dije cuando bailaba a favor de la poesía lírica y en contra de apuestos, risueños y aseados vencedores

morales. El ratón de biblioteca y animal literario, cuando es tan bueno e inteligente, es para sí mismo una alegría: para sí y para un buen montón de gente. Al mundo se le escapa todo eso y se ríe de la vida y la belleza, y las excepciones son escasas y rara vez visibles. Los triunfos de Heyse se le atribuyen más bien a su personalidad que a su poesía». Y por si no se le entiende, intenta explicarse: «Una de mis actividades favoritas cuando hablo con los míos es llamarles la atención sobre el desinterés del arte, el conocimiento y la erudición; en particular, de la lírica y la épica (en una clara parodia de mí mismo), y alabar las ventajas, puede que con algo de exageración, que hacen felices a la gente bella y risueña, y en las que caen una y otra vez. Ya desde joven pensaba bien al contrario: la belleza no es nada; el talento lo es todo».

Así es como debe ser. El derecho a ironizar sobre el intelecto y la «literatura» (unas formas de las que hoy en día individuos no autorizados hacen un uso desdeñable) debe ganarse antes con grandes creaciones. El escepticismo del artista ante el arte o su gremio sólo será digno si va unido a aquella religiosidad artística a la que está ligada la dedicación creativa, y que Fontane, muy nórdico en este aspecto, identificaba casi con la genialidad. «Dones», reza una sentencia de Adolf Menzel:

Dones, quién los tuviera. ¡El talento: un juguete para los niños! Sólo el rigor hace al hombre, y sólo la diligencia al genio.

Y con ello se corresponde en su epistolario: «Ya no quedan “talentos” puros hoy día. Al menos ya no significan nada, absolutamente nada. El que hoy en día se dedica al arte y quiere alcanzar algo, por descontado que necesita sobre todo talento, pero en segundo lugar formación, conocimientos, gusto y una férrea voluntad de trabajo. Pero esa voluntad no significa producción en masa. Strom, que necesitaba de más tiempo para escribir un pequeño poema lírico que Brachvogel para una novela de tres tomos, salió de paseo más a menudo que este último, pero ha realizado como artista una labor cien veces mayor. Un hombre corriente escribe sin control todo lo que le pasa por la cabeza. El artista, el verdadero poeta, a menudo necesita dos semanas para encontrar una sola palabra».

Formación, conocimientos, gusto y voluntad: se puede ver que este nórdico, que tenía más del margraviato de Brandenburgo que de Gascuña, no era hijo del entusiasmo, sino del conocimiento, de aquel saber de las ideas que por cierto es propio de las grandes épocas del arte poético. Cita a Goethe: «La producción de un poeta y escritor respetable depende siempre de su cantidad de conocimientos». Y añade: «Terriblemente cierto. Sin crítica también se puede escribir algo bueno, quizá tan bueno, que jamás se pueda conseguir después con crítica. Eso no se puede negar. Pero eso son sólo “regalos divinos”, que, por serlo, llegan muy rara vez. Una vez al año, y el año tiene trescientos sesenta y cinco días. Para los otros trescientos sesenta y cuatro es la crítica la que decide la cantidad de conocimientos. En cuestiones poéticas he llevado treinta años de conocimientos de ventaja a mi prosa, por eso leo mis poemas con satisfacción o al menos sin sentir vergüenza, mientras que mi prosa de entonces me provoca bochorno y rubor». «Toda mi creación —confiesa en otra ocasión— se mueve entre la psicografía y la crítica, en un traer a la luz la creación que surge de la oscuridad. Ha sido por puro azar que pudiese escribir toda esta novela con la mitad de esfuerzo. Y a pesar de todo, finalmente nadie lo notará». Comentarios y opiniones de este estilo sobre su obra se encuentran por todas partes en sus epístolas. Estimulan por su sinceridad, su experiencia directa y ofrecen una vista del interior del taller de un artista ingenioso y apasionado.

Fontane habla de las pequeñas ayudas y apoyos que durante la creación deben hacer olvidar al artista que todo ha de surgir de la nada, de su propio interior: «Se ha de ser consciente de que hay una proporción de cosas reales que sí están a nuestro alrededor, y desde esa consciencia surge la creación. Cuántas veces he escuchado: “Pero parece que no las hayas utilizado”. No es cierto. Sí que lo he hecho. Sólo que quedan entre bastidores». O habla en ocasiones de las cartas que Effi no quemó y que la delataron, de las cosas triviales y ansiadas, y declara con firmeza lo trivial como lo menos malo. O se protege de la forma más enérgica e instructiva de las correcciones estilísticas, que un redactor se creyó obligado a hacer en el manuscrito de *Ellenklipp*. «Le ofrezco en sacrificio», así lo escribe él mismo, «mis puntos», pero tiene que dejar intacta mi conjunción «y», mis «yes», allí donde aparecen en tropel. Me tengo, que quede entre nosotros, por un estilista, no uno de esos insoportables escritores monótonos que para todo tienen una sola forma y un único tono, sino por un auténtico estilista. Es decir, un escritor que no impone sobre las cosas un heredado estilo Marlitt o simplón, sino que, al contrario, toma el estilo siempre cambiante de la propia cosa de la que está tratando. Y por eso sucede que unas veces escribo frases que tienen catorce líneas y otras veces algunas que no llegan a las catorce sílabas, o a menudo sólo catorce letras. Y lo mismo ocurre con los «yes». Si quisiera ponerlo todo en un estilo de «yes», tendrían que encerrarme por ser un peligro público. Pero escribo tanto novelas con o sin ellas, en función del acomodo y observación del tema. Cuanto más modernas, menos «yes». Cuanto más sencillas, cuanto mayor *sancta simplicitas*, más «yes». La «y» es bíblico-

patriarcal y omnipresente allí donde han de explicarse efectos posteriores de los que no se pueden prescindir. La fuerza popular del consejo sobre el «acomodo y observación» es muy hilarante. El estilo de la cosa y el dejar hablar a los objetos fue una de las ideas artísticas favoritas de Fontane, y en su excelente crítica a Keller vuelve al tema con la máxima exigencia. Fontane afirma que Keller es básicamente un escritor de cuentos: no escribe nada sobre un determinado siglo, apenas sobre determinado lugar, ni sobre circunstancias de uniones administrativas y por ello separaciones lingüísticas, sino que mantiene en sus presentaciones, tanto para tiempos pasados como nuevos, un lenguaje de cuento sin variaciones, distinguido, y con una participación uniforme y mínima. Afirma que todo lo histórico da mal resultado también en las historias como *Dietwegen*, que no pueden ofrecer un cuento sino sólo un retrato de costumbres y situaciones históricas. ¿Y cuál es el motivo? El motivo es que el suizo, aparte de todas sus dotes, humor y arte, carecía de una cosa: estilo. En realidad, ¿qué es el estilo? «Si por estilo se entiende — aclara Fontane— la forma de escribir característica, cuyo reconocimiento fue cumbre en la frase de Buffon
“Le style
c’est
l’homme”,
entonces Keller no sólo tiene estilo, sino que lo tiene más que ningún otro. Pero este concepto de “estilo” está anticuado, y en su lugar se me ocurre la siguiente definición, más acertada: “Una obra cuenta con más estilo cuanto más objetiva es, es decir: cuanto más sea la realidad la que hable por sí misma, cuanto más libre esté de accesorios, o las ideas que aparezcan contradigan en mayor medida las características o costumbres del artista”. Si esto es cierto (y lo tengo por tal), entonces en el caso de Keller hemos de hablar más bien de ausencia que de presencia de estilo. Otorga a todo y a cada cosa un tono muy determinado, personalísimo, que unas veces encaja y otras no. Si encaja, repito, nacerá un efecto extraordinario, pero si no lo hace, aparecen disonancias que en ocasiones se elevan hasta la estridencia. No conoce el *suum cuique*, y se inclina más bien hacia el: “Al César lo que es del César, y a Dios lo que es de Dios”. Pasa sin piedad por su tamiz al estilo Keller a todo el santo mundo».

¡Curioso! Es Fontane en persona el que ha dicho todo esto, pero si se repasan las cinco últimas frases con su ritmo y su tono (y no me refiero al contenido), uno se pregunta, al ser tan típicas de Fontane, si podrían encontrarse en un diálogo de alguna de sus novelas. ¿No conversan así Rex y Czako con su amigo Stechlin?, y bien nos podemos preguntar si los tenientes prusianos acaso resultaban tan agradables. En realidad, esa objeción, si es que puede llamarse así, que Fontane hace a Keller se le puede hacer a Fontane casi en el mismo grado. Él también ha transferido a todo el santo mundo su propio estilo. ¿Y quién hubiese preferido lo contrario? La objeción no es tal, y la teoría del estilo de Fontane de influencias naturalistas no está al frente de su praxis, sino que cada cosa aporta su propio estilo, y no le convienen ni el manierismo ni el estilo plano y monótono. Pero aquel mimetismo estilístico que permite a un escritor llenar cualquier momento de su obra con la atmósfera del mundo que presenta, no acaba en absoluto con la singularidad de su estilo personal. Richard Wagner, igual que cualquier otro artista que merezca tal calificativo, nunca ha repetido nada, y en cada una de sus obras es un creador completamente nuevo. Lo cual no significa que en cierto pentagrama, en determinado compás de alguna de sus obras, se le pueda reconocer con claridad. La cuestión es que el propio artista no es quien habla, sino que deja que las cosas hablen por sí mismas, pero que lo hagan al estilo personal del autor. Y repito: ¿quién desearía que Fontane no lo hubiese hecho así?

Es absolutamente encantador el estilo, en especial el de su última época, y cómo se nos vuelve a aproximar en sus cartas de los ochenta y noventa. Personalmente me permito confesar que ningún escritor pasado o presente me despierta tanta simpatía y gratitud, ni este encanto inmediato e instintivo, esta devoción, calidez y satisfacción directas, que me hacen sentir cada uno de sus versos, cada línea de sus cartas, cada pequeño instante de sus diálogos. Poseía una confortable amplitud de prosa ligera y clara, con una secreta inclinación a lo narrativo, con abreviaturas pequeñas y escandidas, poseía algo elevado pero cómodo, con aparente desenvoltura, y mantenía la serenidad y la compostura, una forma interior sólo imaginable después de una práctica prolongada de la poesía. Se acerca de hecho a la poesía mucho más de lo que a su sencilla humildad le gustaría. Tiene conciencia poética, necesidad poética, escribe en presencia de la propia poesía, como sus antiguos versos, que se acercan al estilo de su prosa, y resultan tan concentrados y perfectos que uno ya los conoce de memoria. Eso es lo extraño, que la prosa se sublima al mismo nivel que la propia poesía, y (¡permítanme la expresión!) se desperdicia en ella. A menudo se ha dicho de él que era un *causeur*, e incluso él mismo lo ha hecho. Lo cierto, sin embargo, es que era un declamador, incluso cuando parecía conversar, y en su conversación, que tras *Effi Briest* adquirió un tono poético por encima de lo imaginable, se desvanece lo material hasta un punto en el que no hay sino un juego artístico de tonos e ideas. ¿Había llegado al ocaso? Parece ser que él mismo lo tomó como tal. «El

libro —dice refiriéndose a *Die Poggenpuhls*— no es una novela ni tiene contenido. El "cómo" sustituye al "qué" (no se me puede decir nada más amable). Naturalmente que la literatura no puede hacerse al gusto de los caballeros muy muy mayores. Pero se le puede acercar un poco». Una opinión que a él le conviene, pero que no nos resultaría tan conveniente al resto. No obstante, si nuestra literatura narrativa hubiese recibido más influencia del gusto de los señores muy muy mayores, tendríamos hoy en la novela alemana más arte y menos provincianismo burgués. Y lo que aún es más digno de mención es que ese proceso de senectud y ocaso dieron como resultado el proyecto de *Die Likedeeler*.

«Quiero escribir una nueva novela —dice el 16 de marzo de 1895— (da igual si la concluyo o no), una novela excepcional, diferente a todo lo que haya escrito antes, aunque algunos se inclinarán por etiquetarla como *Ekkehart* de Victor von Scheffel o *Die Ahnen* de Gustav Freytag. Pero se aleja bastante de ellos en tanto que pretende convertirse en una reconciliación entre mi más antiguo y romántico estilo de las baladas y mi más actual estilo novelístico, que resulta más realista. La novela de Willibald Alexis *Die Hosen des Herrn von Bredow* es la que más se ha acercado a esa mezcla, con la única diferencia de que, en el caso de Alexis, la novela tiene algo de humorístico, como le corresponde, mientras que mi obra está pensada como tragedia fantástica y grotesca. Se titula *Die Likedeeler* (*Likedealer*, Igualitarios, sucesores de los Hermanos Vitalianos, por entonces, el año 1400, comunistas), un grupo de piratas que recuerda a Karl Moor y los suyos, que lucharon bajo el mando de Klaus Störtebeker y que fueron ejecutados en grupo en la isla de Grasbrook, Hamburgo. Lo tengo todo claro, pero sólo me falta una cosa: documentarme. Todo pasa ante mí como una fantasmagoría, y una fantasmagoría es lo que volverá a ser. Pero antes de que se convierta en una, debe mantener una forma clara y definida en mi cabeza…». Y entonces pide escritos, libros y se anima con documentos de archivo…

Si *Die Likedeeler* hubiese llegado a escribirse, tendríamos hoy una novela histórica del más alto nivel poético, como poseen Francia con *Salammbô* y Bélgica con *Ulenspiegel*. No pudo ser. ¿No había llegado el momento? Hasta julio se dedicó a su preparación y estudio. Y después el proyecto cayó en el silencio.

Este hundimiento silencioso de una tarea tan nueva, elevada y estremecedora, esta muerte tranquila de una prometedora y apasionante concepción inmortal da que pensar. Sólo el agotamiento no es motivo para una renuncia así. Le traía sin cuidado si se terminaba o no. ¿Estableció con esta empresa los límites a superar, que, de acuerdo con su visión, la naturaleza humana y en especial la propia necesitaban para sacar a la luz su capacidad plena? «Sólo necesitamos un círculo muy reducido para ser grandes». «Pequeño es aquel que se sobrevalora». «No voy a conseguir dar este salto». Visto desde la tranquilidad y el escepticismo de Fontane, el proyecto de *Die Likedeeler* nacía de la soberbia, y este origen podía reconocerse como tal y serle reprochado. Fontane fue durante largo tiempo muy duro a la hora de limitarse, sublime entre la burguesía y como novelista, declamador en secreto. Pero durante un par de meses tardíos soñó con parecer lo que siempre había sido. Y después se avergonzó de su soberbia: encontró ridículo hacer que sus ancianos huesos realizaran un formidable esfuerzo con ese salto, y se retiró sin decir nada de una obra que en realidad suponía para él algo menos nuevo y original de lo que había pensado en un principio. Suele ocurrir cuando se tiene la visión del tema. Dotes y necesidades de naturaleza aristocrática, que se han utilizado durante tiempo para beneficio de cuestiones burguesas banales, las han ido dotando de un cariz noble, que para el experto las elevan hasta altas esferas. Estas dotes dirigidas finalmente a tareas «respetables» revelarán su nobleza hasta ante los ojos más necios. Pero falta el estímulo de lo antagónico, el encanto propio de lo secreto. Y en consecuencia, una obra que acaba desvelándose totalmente innecesaria termina por abandonarse.

Quizá la concepción de la fantástica narración en prosa de *Die Likedeeler* fue fruto del enojo por la grave incomprensión a la que su naturaleza estuvo expuesta hasta el último momento. «Me fui a dormir con María Estuardo y me levanté con Archibald Douglas. La fantasía romántica me ha cautivado desde mi juventud y ha formado mi singular naturaleza francesa del sur. Y ahora aparece Hart y me dice: Soy un tipo bueno, medianamente decente, aunque burgués con una baqueta de rifle prusiano en la espalda. ¡Dios bendito!». ¿Era Fontane un romántico? Su visita a Bayreuth en 1889 es un tremendo fracaso, aunque sólo por motivos de salud: sobre el final de la obertura se encuentra mal y se marcha. Pero podría pensarse que en realidad si hubiese tenido interés por *Parsifal* no se habría sentido indispuesto, y el tono cómico en el que se refiere al «gran esfuerzo» deja claro que no era devoto de los templos del arte y de los santos teatros. ¿Era un romántico? En el sentido alemán, en absoluto. Su romanticismo es de origen romántico, al estilo Cyrano de Bergerac, de un romántico que esgrime los versos. Aunque también introduce motivos terroríficos como la ciudad de Toser y el cadalso, a modo de expiación de las faltas graves. Pero la esencia de su romanticismo son el racionalismo, el espíritu alegre y la sensualidad libre, y lo que no está en absoluto presente es la censura de lo musical, el fervor de la metafísica y la oscura profundidad. Es más, también falta, por amor a

lo histórico, el rasgo reaccionario, el odio contra «este tiempo». Theodor Fontane se distinguió por una modernidad valiente, tal como Richard Dehmel hoy la representa.

En un alma sin ataduras, que no ha jurado sobre nada y que ve todas las cosas de la vida desde al menos dos perspectivas diferentes, son normales contradicciones como la que un día lo llevó a declararse con extraordinaria determinación en contra de la Alemania prusiana y enumeró los lugares de los que se podía estar contento: Oberammergrau, Bayreuth, Munich y Weimar. Es sin duda más característica de Fontane la carta en la que habla sobre el público berlinés, residencial, de gran ciudad, en la que dice que le resulta más simpático y tiene mayor importancia que la *madame* de Sajonia o Turingia con sus medias de punto y bien empapada de Marlitt; o las otras para las que la decencia es lo importante y que, como en el caso de «Wartburg» y «las hijas de la alta aristocracia» de Nietzsche, verán mancillados el «pequeño estilo sajón-turingio» y su moral provinciana.

Por aquel entonces él tiene setenta años, y está cada vez más joven. La «revolución literaria» le encuentra en su apogeo, y compone sobre la serena opinión de los mayores cuya quejumbrosa e imprescindible petulancia no puede entender, y sobre los jóvenes, a quienes pertenecen los días y las horas, que dominan la escena y están en plena acción. En el año 80, como debe ser, hace observaciones rebeldes contra los clásicos. «Porque tomamos ante nuestros clásicos una posición muy parcial, aunque sólo sea cuando queremos salir como sea del aburrimiento y la mediocridad, y literariamente resultamos tan "idólatras" como en política». Incluso contra Schiller, que hasta entonces era «el número uno», podemos ver en un momento dado que adopta una posición crítica. El medio-extranjero identifica todo lo de Schiller como medio-extranjero en comparación con el espíritu nacional y popular burgués. El epígono, todo «lo que fue escrito entre los treinta y los setenta», «está muerto y bien muerto». «La brillante oratoria ya no vuelve a surgir». Y mientras está harto de pequeños perturbadores y agitadores, este hombre de setenta y cinco años saluda al *Weber* de Hauptmann como «excelente», «creador de una época», «una obra espléndida de la literatura alemana».

Entre las opiniones sobre las grandes creaciones modernas, resulta maravillosamente fontaniana la referente a Strindberg. Fue algo más que un instinto lo que tuvo que despertarse contra este antipático genio, algo más que su sentido de la discreción, del tacto, de la limpieza, de la amabilidad y compostura burguesa. Lo mismo ocurrió contra el desdichado Stauffer, del que afirma: «Esa clase de genios no debería existir, y si el mundo de la genialidad así lo requiere, entonces prefiero a los tejedores de lienzos». Y sólo «el alegato de un loco» ha podido dejar que saliera de él esta frase: «El que escribe libros así, lo hace desde la ira, y es por supuesto un mezquino». Y añade a continuación: «Por otra parte, sigue siendo cierto que las explicaciones, declaraciones y argumentos más importantes han de agradecerse a las personas menos fiables. Las revoluciones surgen siempre de la chusma, los jugadores compulsivos y los locos, y ¡qué sería de nosotros sin revoluciones!». ¡Y este es el burgués, el estricto hombre de orden! ¡Se plantea retóricamente: Qué sería de nosotros sin revoluciones! Y no es sólo un capricho pasajero. En *Die Likedeeler* le seduce la «modernidad socialdemócrata». El hombre de los poemas y las historias del margraviato escribe así a su amigo inglés James Morris: «Todo el interés se centra en el cuarto estado. La burguesía es despreciable, y la nobleza y el clero están anticuados, siempre igual. El nuevo y mejor mundo comienza en el cuarto estado. Incluso aunque sólo esté constituido por aspiraciones y deseos. Y no son sólo eso. Lo que piensan, hablan y escriben los trabajadores ha superado de hecho a lo que piensan, hablan y escriben las antiguas clases dominantes. Todo en ellos es mucho más sincero, auténtico y lleno de vida. Ellos, los trabajadores, concentran todo lo nuevo, no sólo tienen nuevas metas, sino también nuevas vías». Esto lo dijo en el año 96. Dieciocho años antes escribía así a su mujer: «La única forma de mantener el orden en las masas es el miedo o la religión, con ayuda de un regimiento terrenal o eclesiástico, y cualquier intento de conseguirlo sin la ayuda de estos grandes prebostes está condenado al fracaso. Se creyó que la "educación" podía sustituirlos, y se glorificaron la "formación obligatoria" y el "servicio militar". Pues estamos arreglados. Con ambos, el Estado ha soltado las riendas: la formación obligatoria ha enseñado a todo el mundo a leer, y una educación a medias ha acabado con la autoridad que le quedaba. El servicio militar ha enseñado a todo el pueblo a disparar y a que la masa pasara del caos a saber organizarse». Este análisis, que hoy se ha convertido en tópico, fue la vivencia de los años setenta, y su epistolario recuerda, entre muchos otros, a Nietzsche, que pregunta con sorna: «En una palabra: ¿qué queremos? Si queremos esclavos, hay que ser un chiflado para educar a señores». Entre esta visión y el entusiasmo incondicional por el cuarto estado del Fontane más viejo existe cierta evolución, la toma de conciencia de su modernidad, su maravilloso crecimiento en juventud y futuro. Pero es igual de cierto que él era el hombre en el que podían convivir ambas visiones, la conservadora y la revolucionaria, porque su psique política era artísticamente compleja, era poco de fiar en el sentido sublime del término, y apenas se sorprendió de que a sus setenta y cinco años se le acercara, no la

nobleza de Stechow, Bredow y Rochow, sino la otra, la de espíritu sospechoso y «casi prehistórica».

Y esta complicación era más culpable que la «carencia de sentido de la solemnidad» (aunque puede que sean lo mismo) de que Fontane «no llegará lejos», de que el poeta del viejo Derfflinger, del viejo Dessauer, del viejo Zieten, de los *Cármina* berlineses no llegara a ser oficial, ni tampoco caballero de la Orden del Águila o cortesano como Adolf Menzel. Es indiscutible que en el caso de los artistas influyentes, de los altos artesanos, lo espiritual y problemático coincide con lo técnico más a menudo que en el caso de los escritores. Nadie les impide adoptar para sus ideas lo actual y lo material, y nadie les impide, discretos de alma, inofensivos e inocentes, poder conservar con semblante satisfecho sus Capas de la Orden o sus títulos nobiliarios. Un gran pintor puede llegar a ser oficial, pero nunca podrá serlo un gran escritor. Porque todo lo relacionado con la posición, el atractivo y el valor de su personalidad, el matiz intelectual, la problemática que plantea, la libertad responsable, debe de aparecer ante los ojos de los gobernantes como sospechoso e incompatible con sus convicciones. De la Prusia oficial no se puede esperar que tome en serio a un declamador patriótico, que declaró en una ocasión que el prusianismo recalcitrante era la más baja expresión cultural de todas las existentes.

Libertad responsable: quizá utilizó esa calificación para definir su situación política. En el año 87 tiene que ir a votar. «Aún me querían citar a las doce a las urnas con un "requerimiento urgente". Lo rechacé a riesgo de ser sancionado. La situación es tan compleja en mi caso, que en pro del honor y la decencia no puedo votar». En el año 90 es aún más frívolo: «Y ahora aparezco y, después de muchos muchos años deposito mi voto en la urna. ¿Y cuál ha sido? Pues he cedido la vergüenza de esa decisión a mis botones y lo he elegido al azar, contándolos. Sólo aquel que no lo sabe está realmente seguro…».

Un cantonalista inseguro. No se ha reconocido ni una sola vez como crítico teatral, aunque ¿podría en realidad decir también exactamente lo contrario? Siente amor por la nobleza «humana y novelística», pero políticamente le resultan demasiado contrarios, y ha tenido que acostumbrarse a que su clandestino pero siempre presente amor por la nobleza sea tratado con *soupçon*, porque él interpretaba «su propia melodía y no la que marcaba la partitura». Ama a los judíos, «los prefiere en realidad a los wendo-germánicos» y ha «tenido que reconocer ante la nobleza, a la que tanto quiero, que la libertad y la cultura más selecta se han extendido entre nosotros, al menos en Berlín, sobre todo a través de la rica comunidad judía». Pero no quiere ser gobernado por judíos, no es en absoluto liberal y se manifiesta de la forma más despectiva sobre los «artículos de la libertad» desde el idilio patriarcal de Nuevo Brandenburgo. ¿Se considera al «paseante» como un enaltecedor del margraviato? Él da las gracias. «He dicho y he querido decir: "Hijos, no es tan malo como lo pintáis", y estaba en lo correcto, pero es una necedad querer ver en estos libros entusiasmo por el margraviato y sus habitantes. No era tan estúpido. Sin embargo, sólo con eso, a pesar de Gossler y el "alistamiento", no se puede conseguir nada oficial. En definitiva esto es también sólo la reserva de un momento, un distanciamiento de la personalidad tierna lejos de la brutalidad. Lo que los "paseos" querían decir en realidad está expresado de forma más dura en otro lugar del epistolario: siendo crítico, dice, se tiene que destacar "no sólo cómo se aprende a conocer al margraviato y a sus habitantes, sino también, sin menoscabo de toda la grosería y antipatía, a reconocer la exhibición de la marcha del deber y la vara del servicio, y comprobar que este último número de Alemania estaba llamado a convertirse en el primero"». Este es el abandono de sí mismos de los hombres dedicados a la belleza, que descubren con sumisión que no son la delicadeza ni el gusto artístico los que transmiten el mensaje histórico en la vida estatal, sino la firmeza y la rigurosa disciplina.

Ha cantado en varias ocasiones a la figura de Bismarck, en sus cartas le ha dedicado muchas palabras, y no sé si por el canto o la palabra se averiguan tantas cosas sobre Fontane como sobre Bismarck. La figura del canciller alemán se observa con el ojo clínico del escepticismo y, también, del odio: inquisitivo y sospechoso. Sin embargo, el anciano no concede a los jóvenes el beneficio de la duda. «Los estudiantes —escribe el día del aniversario de Bismarck del año 95— tienen que ser apasionados: ese es su maldito deber y su culpa. Para los pájaros viejos es diferente o como poco más difícil. Esa mezcla entre superhombre y astuto zorro, de fundador del Estado y objetor de conciencia, de héroe y cobardica, que nunca ha matado una mosca, me provoca sentimientos enfrentados y hace surgir en mí una clara y pura admiración…». Era demasiado leal como para ganarse la legitimidad ante el partido de los genios: «Desde el principio estoy del lado del káiser… Bismarck ha sido el mayor custodio de los principios que jamás ha existido, y un "principio" ha terminado por derrocarle, por vencerle, el mismo principio que ha enarbolado durante su vida y que jamás ha sido moneda de cambio. El poder del reino de los Hohenzollern (un poder ganado con justicia) fue más fuerte que su genio y su astucia. Guarda un enorme parecido con el *Wallenstein* de Schiller (la figura histórica era distinta): genio, salvador del Estado y culpable de alta traición sentimental. Siempre yo, yo y yo, y cuando la historia no puede seguir, quejas por la ingratitud y sentidas lágrimas del norte

alemán. Cuando siento al Bismarck herramienta de la providencia divina, me inclino ante él, pero cuando es él mismo, un noble hacendado, miembro de la corporación de mantenimiento de diques, responsable de uno de ellos y ávido negociante, me resulta bastante antipático». No era lo suficientemente cínico ni pesimista, y por diferenciarlo de Montaigne, en su corazón existía demasiado a favor de lo «honorable» y en contra de lo «útil» como para poder festejar sin condición el maquiavelismo del fundador del reino. «Es la figura más interesante imaginable». No conozco a nadie que lo sea más, pero esa inclinación constante por engañar a los hombres, esa perfecta argucia me resulta desagradable, y cuando me quiero erguir, tengo que mirar hacia otros héroes. ¿A cuáles? Mito y psicología: dos cosas diferentes, y cuando habitan en el mismo interior, cuando se unen la declamación y la escritura, siempre aparecen contradicciones. La admiración que el escritor psicólogo rinde a la grandeza no es la transparente admiración estudiantil, no mira a los héroes para elevarse. El héroe es para él «la figura más interesante imaginable». Pero ya no queda en la auténtica pasión de escritor y psicólogo interés por todos los naturalismos, maldades o ironías del conocimiento. En cartas como las que han aparecido, el escéptico psicólogo habla sobre un héroe aún en vida. La muerte de Bismarck hizo que Fontane, ante esta nueva gran etapa germánica, recuperase la veneración mística y el gran estilo intuitivo a los que él mismo, sólo tres años atrás, había querido obligar a la juventud, y declamaba:

Widukind le invita consigo:
en el bosque de Sajonia debe ser enterrado.

El poeta es conservador en tanto que protector del mito. Pero la psicología es el arma más certera de la ilustración democrática. En las cartas tardías de Fontane, del enaltecedor de la nobleza bélica de Prusia, cartas privadas no publicadas, se encuentran manifestaciones de claro corte revolucionario y democrático, expresiones de carácter pacifista y antimilitarista, que no sólo se comprenden bajo la óptica de la actualización benévola y rejuvenecedora del momento literario revolucionario de 1880, sino que pertenecían totalmente a su propio ser, a lo racionalista y humanitario del siglo XVIII (¿y del siglo XX también?) que había en él, y justificaba en gran medida el *soupçon* posterior con el que debía aparentar tratar su siempre presente pero secreto amor por la nobleza. Almas como la suya deben de antojarse difíciles y poco fiables en su actitud política, porque las contradicciones que provocan debates a diario sólo encuentran reconciliación y respuesta en el futuro.

La función que nos ofrece el viejo Fontane, la función de un envejecimiento que resulta un rejuvenecimiento artístico, espiritual y físico, la de una segunda y auténtica juventud, y una madurez a muy tardía edad, no tiene parangón en la historia del pensamiento. «Con los años, me he vuelto más joven —escribió a un amigo el jovenzuelo de ochenta y dos años—, y la energía vital, que en realidad es parte de la juventud, parece que está creciendo ahora en mí, a medida que se desenrolla el hilo de la vida». Esa es una conclusión de su particularidad vital. Nació para convertirse en «el viejo Fontane» que seguirá viviendo. Las seis primeras décadas de su vida, casi desconocidas, fueron una preparación para las dos últimas, las que, bondadoso y escéptico, pasó a la sombra creciente del último enigma, y su vida parece enseñar que la madurez en la muerte es la auténtica madurez en la vida. Esta singular y amable criatura maduró cada vez más libre y sabia, en espera de acoger la última respuesta. En el legado de este hombre inmortal se halló una hermosa sentencia:

La vida; dichoso aquel que la gasta.
Alegría, niños, el pan de cada día,
y lo mejor que nos envía
es saber que lo que llega
es la salida, la muerte.

THOMAS MANN


Effi Briest



1

Delante de la casa señorial de Hohen-Cremmen, habitada ya desde los tiempos del príncipe elector Jorge Guillermo por la familia Briest, el sol caía con fuerza sobre la calle del pueblo sumida en la quietud del mediodía, mientras que del lado del parque y del jardín, el ala rectangular del edificio arrojaba una generosa sombra, primero sobre una galería de baldosas blancas y verdes, y luego sobre una rotonda con un reloj de sol en el centro y bordeada de caña índica y arbustos de ruibarbo. Unos veinte pasos más adelante, siguiendo justamente la dirección y emplazamiento del ala lateral, corría el muro del camposanto enteramente cubierto de hiedra y sólo en un punto interrumpido por una cancela de hierro pintada de blanco, tras la cual se alzaba el campanario de Hohen-Cremmen, todo de mampostería y con su veleta reluciente porque recientemente la habían vuelto a dorar. La fachada, el ala lateral y el muro del cementerio formaban un conjunto a modo de herradura que delimitaba un pequeño jardín, en cuya parte abierta se veía un estanque con su embarcadero y su bote amarrado, y algo más allá un columpio cuyo tablón de madera era sostenido en sus extremos por dos pares de cuerdas, ya que la estructura de la que colgaban se hallaba un tanto combada. Entre el estanque y la rotonda se erguían, ocultando a medias el columpio, unos viejos y robustos plátanos.

Al pie de la fachada principal de la casa señorial, una terraza en suave pendiente guarnecida de tiestos con áloes y algunas sillas de jardín ofrecía, cuando el cielo estaba nublado, una agradable estancia propicia a la vez para todo género de diversiones; pero los días en que el sol caía a plomo el lugar preferido para estar era sin duda la zona del jardín, especialmente por parte de la dueña y la heredera de la casa, que también hoy se hallaban sentadas a la sombra en medio de la galería embaldosada, de espaldas a un par de ventanas abiertas festoneadas por la enramada de una parra y al lado de una pequeña escalinata cuyos cuatro escalones conducían desde el jardín al parterre del ala lateral. Ambas, madre e hija, se hallaban entregadas afanosamente a sus labores de bordado, un mantel de altar formado por varios retales de tela cuadrados. Sobre una gran mesa redonda descansaba un revoltijo multicolor de madejas de lana y ovillos de seda, y entre ellos, sobrantes del *lunch*, unos platos de postre y una bandeja de mayólica llena de hermosas y orondas grosellas. Las agujas de punto de las damas iban y venían con movimientos seguros y rápidos, pero mientras que la madre no quitaba la vista de la labor, la hija, a la que todo el mundo llamaba Effi, dejaba de vez en cuando la aguja para levantarse y hacer toda una serie de flexiones y estiramientos propios de una tabla doméstica de gimnasia terapéutica. Era evidente que se entregaba con singular afición a estos ejercicios, realizados con cierta comicidad intencionada; cada vez que se erguía y alzaba lentamente los brazos hasta juntar las palmas por encima de la cabeza, también la madre levantaba los ojos, pero sólo para dirigirle una fugaz mirada furtiva, pues no quería demostrar a su hija lo encantadora que le parecía, un impulso de orgullo materno plenamente justificado. Effi llevaba un vestido de hilo con rayas azules y blancas, una especie de bata cuyo talle estaba ceñido únicamente por un cinturón de cuero color bronce, ligeramente escotada y con un amplio cuello marinero que le caía sobre los hombros y la nuca. En todos sus gestos se aunaban petulancia y gracia, mientras que sus risueños ojos castaños delataban una gran inteligencia natural, un ansia plena de vida y un corazón bondadoso. La llamaban «la pequeña», lo cual no tenía más remedio que admitir, ya que su hermosa y esbelta mamá le sacaba todavía un palmo.

Acababa Effi de levantarse una vez más para hacer sus flexiones alternativamente a derecha e izquierda cuando su madre, alzando de nuevo los ojos del bordado, exclamó:

—¡Pero Effi!, tal vez deberías haber sido amazona. Siempre subida al trapecio, siempre volando por los aires. A veces creo que es lo que te hubiera gustado.

—Tal vez, mamá. Pero, de ser así, ¿de quién sería la culpa? ¿A quién habría salido? A nadie más que a ti. Porque no irás a creer que he salido a papá… ¿Ves como tú misma te ríes? Y, además, ¿por qué me haces ponerme este saco, este blusón de muchacho? A veces pienso que cualquier día tendré que volver a vestir de corto. Y tendré que hacer de nuevo reverencias como una niña pequeña, y si vienen los húsares de

Rathenow volveré a cabalgar, hop, hop, sobre las rodillas del coronel Goetze. ¿Y por qué no? Después de todo, tiene tres cuartas partes de tío y tan sólo una de pretendiente. ¡Tú tienes la culpa! ¿Por qué no tengo vestidos como es debido? ¿Por qué no haces de mí una señorita?

—¿Es eso lo que quieres?

—No.

Y salió corriendo hacia su mamá, la abrazó impetuosamente y la besó.

—No debes ser tan impulsiva, Effi, ni tan apasionada. Me preocupa cuando te veo comportarte así…

La madre parecía seriamente decidida a seguir manifestando sus inquietudes y temores, pero tuvo que interrumpirse porque en ese preciso instante tres jóvenes muchachas entraron en el jardín por la cancela de hierro del camposanto y avanzaron por la vereda de gravilla que conducía a la rotonda y al reloj de sol. Las tres saludaron a un tiempo con sus sombrillas a Effi y luego se dirigieron presurosas hacia la señora Von Briest para besarle la mano. Esta les hizo unas rápidas preguntas y después las invitó a que se quedaran una media hora para hacerles compañía, o al menos a Effi.

—De todos modos, yo tengo cosas que hacer, y las jóvenes siempre os encontráis más a gusto a solas. Así que pasadlo bien.

Tras decir estas palabras, subió la escalinata de piedra que conducía al jardín del ala lateral.

Y entonces la juventud se quedó realmente a solas.

Dos de las jóvenes, personillas menudas y rollizas cuyas pecas y excelente buen humor casaban admirablemente con su rubio cabello rizado de un tono rojizo, eran hermanas gemelas. Su padre, el maestro Jahnke, era un entusiasta de la Hansa, de Escandinavia y de Fritz Reuter, su paisano mecklemburgués y poeta predilecto, de quien había tomado como modelo a Mining y Lining para poner a sus hijas los nombres de Bertha y Hertha. La tercera de las jóvenes era Hulda Niemeyer, hija única del pastor Niemeyer. Tenía un aire más distinguido que las otras dos, pero también era más sosa y presumida, una rubia linfática de ojos un tanto saltones e inexpresivos, que parecían buscar algo de continuo, lo cual incluso había llevado a decir a Klitzing, el de húsares: «Parece que esté esperando la aparición del arcángel Gabriel en cualquier momento». Effi encontraba que, aunque algo mordaz, a Klitzing le sobraba razón, pero evitaba hacer diferencias entre las tres amigas. Sin embargo, no era eso en lo que pensaba en ese instante y, apoyando los brazos en la mesa, exclamó:

—¡Qué aburrimiento de bordado! Gracias a Dios que habéis venido.

—Pero hemos ahuyentado a tu mamá —dijo Hulda.

—¡Oh, no! Como ya os ha dicho, tenía que irse de todos modos; espera visita; un antiguo amigo de su época de soltera, del cual os contaré después una historia de amor, con su héroe, su heroína y su final de renuncia. Vais a quedaros pasmadas, con los ojos como platos. Además, ya he visto ya en Schwantikow al viejo amigo de mamá. Es gobernador provincial, tiene buena planta y un aspecto muy varonil.

—Eso es lo más importante —añadió Hertha.

—Por supuesto que es lo más importante: «las mujeres muy femeninas, los hombres muy varoniles», lo cual, como sabéis, es una de las frases favoritas de papá. Y ahora ayudadme a recoger esta mesa, no quiero que vuelvan a sermonearme.

En un santiamén quedaron las madejas recogidas en el cesto y, una vez que todas se hubieron sentado de nuevo, Hulda dijo:

—Vamos, Effi, ahora ya puedes contarnos esa historia de amor y renuncia. Tal vez no sea tan terrible…

—Una historia de amor y renuncia siempre es algo terrible. Pero no podré empezar hasta que Hertha no se haya comido unas grosellas. ¡No les quita ojo de encima! Adelante, toma todas las que quieras. Luego recogeremos más, pero, eso sí, tira las pieles bien lejos, o mejor aún, ponlas sobre ese trozo de periódico; al acabar, haremos un cucurucho con todo y lo arrojaremos lejos. Mamá se pone mala cuando ve las mondas por el suelo; siempre dice que alguien puede resbalarse con ellas y romperse una pierna.

—No me lo creo —dijo Hertha mientras se aplicaba afanosamente a las grosellas.

—Yo tampoco —confirmó Effi—. Figúrate, yo me caigo por lo menos dos o tres veces al día y aún no me he roto nada. Unas piernas como Dios manda no se rompen así como así. Las mías no, por lo menos, ni tampoco las tuyas, Hertha. ¿Tú qué dices, Hulda?

—No hay que tentar a la suerte. Todo el mundo es muy valiente hasta que se lleva el primer desengaño.

—Tú siempre tan marisabidilla; eres una vieja solterona de nacimiento.

—Bueno, aún espero casarme. Tal vez antes que tú.

—Ya ves… ¿Crees que eso es lo que estoy esperando? ¡Sólo me faltaba eso! Además, ya me saldrá alguien, y quizá pronto. Eso no me preocupa. Precisamente el otro día, el pequeño Ventivegni me dijo: «Señorita Effi, me juego lo que quiera a que este año tendremos aquí fiesta de vigilia y casamiento».

—¿Y qué le contestaste?

—«Es posible», le dije, «muy posible. Hulda es la mayor y cualquier día de estos puede casarse». Pero él no iba por ahí, y repuso: «No, se trata de otra joven, una que es tan morena como rubia es la señorita Hulda». Y me miró con aire muy serio… Pero me estoy yendo por las ramas y me estoy olvidando de mi historia.

—Eso parece. No paras de divagar, y tal vez no quieras contárnosla.

—¡Oh, sí, claro que quiero! Pero si le doy tantas vueltas es porque en toda esta historia hay algo extraño, sí, algo casi romántico.

—Pero ¿no nos habías dicho que es gobernador provincial?

—Así es. Se llama Geert von Innstetten, y es barón. Las tres rompieron a reír.

—¿De qué os reís? —inquirió Effi, molesta—. ¿A qué viene esto?

—Oh, Effi, no pretendemos ofenderte, ni tampoco al barón. ¿Innstetten, has dicho? ¿Y Geert? Pero si nadie por aquí se llama de ese modo. Lo cierto es que los nombres de los nobles pueden llegar a ser muy graciosos.

—Sí, querida, claro que pueden serlo. Para eso son nobles y pueden permitírselo, tanto más cuanto más antiguo es su abolengo. De esto, y no os lo toméis a mal, no entendéis ni una palabra. Pero no vamos a pelearnos por esto. En fin, se llama Geert von Innstetten, y es barón. Tiene exactamente la misma edad que mamá, coinciden hasta en el día.

—¿Y cuántos años tiene tu mamá?

—Treinta y ocho.

—Bonita edad.

—Sí que lo es, y más cuando se tiene el aspecto de ella. Es una mujer realmente hermosa, ¿no os lo parece a vosotras? Y la gracia con que lo hace todo, siempre tan segura de sí misma y tan refinada, y siempre en su lugar, no como papá. Si yo fuese un joven teniente, me enamoraría de ella.

—Pero, Effi, ¿cómo te atreves a decir algo así? —le reprochó Hulda—. Eso va en contra del cuarto mandamiento.

—¡Tonterías! ¿Cómo va a ir eso en contra del cuarto mandamiento? Yo creo que a mamá le complacería saber que he dicho algo así.

—Puede ser —intervino Hertha—, pero vamos allá con esa historia.

—Tranquila, que ya comienzo… En fin, sigamos con el barón Innstetten. Antes de cumplir los veinte años vivía en Rathenow y frecuentaba mucho las fincas de por aquí, aunque su lugar favorito era la casa de mi abuelo Belling en Schwantikow. Naturalmente, la razón de que fuese tan a menudo por allí no era mi abuelo, y cuando mamá habla de ello, se comprende cuál era la causa real de su atracción. Y, además, creo que era mutua.

—¿Y qué ocurrió después?

—Pues ocurrió lo que tenía que ocurrir, lo que pasa siempre. Él era demasiado joven, y cuando entró en escena mi papá, que ya era diputado y propietario de Hohen-Cremmen, la elección no dio lugar a dudas. Ella lo aceptó y se convirtió en la señora Von Briest… Lo demás, lo que vino después, ya lo sabéis vosotras… Lo que vino después fui yo.

—Pues claro que fuiste tú, Effi —exclamó Bertha—. Gracias a Dios. Si hubiera sido de otro modo, ahora no te tendríamos aquí. Y ahora dinos, ¿qué hizo Innstetten? ¿Qué fue de él? No se quitó la vida, porque de lo contrario no le estaríais esperando.

—No, no se quitó la vida, pero algo sí que hubo.

—¿Un intento de suicidio?

—No, eso tampoco. Pero ya no quiso seguir viviendo por estos contornos, e incluso llegó a perder interés por la vida militar. Después de todo, era una época de paz. En resumen, que dejó el ejército y se marchó a estudiar leyes con auténtico celo. No volvió a ingresar en la milicia hasta que estalló la guerra del setenta, pero no se incorporó a su antiguo regimiento, sino al de Perleberg, y ganó la Cruz de Hierro, como es natural, por su arrojo y valentía. Al acabar la guerra volvió a la carrera judicial y, según dicen, tanto el emperador como Bismarck le tienen en gran estima, motivo por el cual llegó a ser gobernador del distrito de Kessin.

—¿Kessin? No conozco ningún Kessin por aquí.

—No, no está en nuestra región, sino muy lejos de aquí, en Pomerania; de hecho, en la Pomerania Oriental, lo cual no quiere decir mucho, porque es una estación balneario (por allí todo son balnearios), y el barón Innstetten hace este viaje de vacaciones para visitar a sus familiares o algo así. Quiere reencontrarse con antiguos amigos y parientes.

—¿Así que tiene parientes aquí?

—Sí y no, según se mire. No hay ningún otro Innstetten por estos contornos; es más, creo que ya no quedan. Pero tiene unos primos lejanos por parte de madre, y supongo que habrá venido para volver a ver Schwantikow y la casa de los Belling, a la cual le unen tantos recuerdos. Estuvo allí anteayer, y hoy piensa venir a Hohen-Cremmen.

—¿Y qué dice tu padre de todo esto?

—Nada. Él no es de esa clase. Conoce perfectamente a mamá, y sólo le toma un poco el pelo.

En ese instante comenzaron a dar las doce, y mientras sonaban aún las campanadas apareció Wilke, el viejo factótum de la casa y de la familia Briest, con un recado para Effi.

—La señora ruega a la señorita que empiece a arreglarse con tiempo, ya que el señor barón llegará a la una en punto.

Y mientras transmitía el recado, Wilke se puso a despejar la mesa de labores de las damas, y lo primero que se dispuso a recoger fue la hoja de periódico en que se amontonaban las pieles de grosellas.

—No, Wilke, déjalo, eso es cosa nuestra… Hertha, haz tú el cucurucho y métele una piedrecilla dentro para que se hunda antes. Luego iremos en largo y fúnebre cortejo para darle sepultura en alta mar.

Wilke sonrió. «Menuda pilluela está hecha la señorita», parecía estar pensando; pero Effi ya había colocado el cucurucho en el centro del tapete y lo había quitado de la mesa con un rápido movimiento.

—Ahora cojámoslo cada una por una esquina y entonemos alguna canción triste.

—Muy bien, Effi. Pero ¿qué vamos a cantar?

—Cualquier cosa, es lo mismo. Basta con que rime en «o»; la «o» es siempre una vocal triste. Cantemos, pues:

Flujo, flujo,
dale a todo su nuevo curso.

Y mientras Effi entonaba con festiva solemnidad esta letanía, las cuatro emprendieron camino hacia el embarcadero del estanque, subieron al bote que se hallaba allí amarrado y dejaron caer el cucurucho a las aguas, que con el guijarro como lastre se deslizó lentamente hasta el fondo.

—La prueba de tu delito se ha hundido, Hertha —dijo Effi—, y eso me hace pensar que así es como antiguamente debían de ser arrojadas al mar, desde un bote como este, las desgraciadas mujeres acusadas, claro está, de infidelidad.

—Pero no aquí.

—No, aquí no —rio Effi—, ese tipo de cosas no suceden aquí, pero sí en Constantinopla. Y ahora que lo pienso, tú deberías saberlo igual que yo, porque estabas conmigo en clase de geografía cuando el ordenando Holzapfel nos lo explicó.

—Sí —repuso Hulda—, siempre estaba contando historias por el estilo. Pero eran esas cosas de las que luego una se olvida.

—Yo no. Yo siempre recuerdo esas cosas.

2

Pcontinuaron charlando de esta guisa durante un largo rato, recordando los días de colegio pasados en común y toda una serie de despropósitos del señor Holzapfel, unas veces entre risas y otras con indignación. Sí, el tema era inagotable y la conversación no hubiera cesado si de repente Hulda no hubiese dicho:

—Pero, Effi, se te va a hacer tarde. Y tienes un aspecto… cómo te diría… como si vinieras de coger cerezas, toda descompuesta y desarreglada; los vestidos de lino siempre se arrugan, y luego ese gran cuello blanco… Sí, ya lo tengo: pareces un grumete.

—Guardiamarina, si no te importa. Para algo había de servirme mi nobleza. Pero da igual, guardiamarina o grumete. Papá volvió a prometerme el otro día que hará poner aquí, junto al columpio, un mástil con sus vergas y su escala de cuerda. Cómo me gustaría eso… no dejaría que nadie me ganase a encaramarme a la cima del gallardete. Y tú, Hulda, subirías por el otro lado y allá arriba, en lo alto, lanzaríamos un hurra y nos daríamos un beso. ¡Rayos y centellas, qué bien lo pasaríamos!

—«Rayos y centellas»… ¡Cómo suena eso…! Hablas realmente como un marinero. Pero ni sueñes que subiré trepando detrás de ti, no soy tan temeraria. A Jahnke le sobra razón cuando dice que tienes demasiado de los Belling, de la parte de tu madre. Yo no soy más que la hija de un simple pastor.

—¡Bah, no me vengas con esas! De las aguas mansas líbreme Dios… ¿No te acuerdas ya de cuando estuvo aquí mi primo Briest, de cadete, pero que ya no era ningún niño? ¿No te acuerdas de cómo te deslizabas por el techo del granero?

¿Y para qué? No te preocupes, no voy a delatarte. Venga, vamos a columpiarnos, dos a cada lado, seguro que las cuerdas aguantan. Pero si no os apetece, porque ya veo que ponéis mala cara, juguemos entonces a pillar. Todavía me queda un cuarto de hora. No quiero entrar aún en casa, y todo simplemente para saludar a un gobernador provincial, y encima de la Pomerania Oriental, y tan entrado en años que incluso podría ser mi padre. Y si además vive en una ciudad portuaria, como dicen que es Kessin, entonces le gustaré más con este traje marinero, y puede que hasta lo considere como una especie de deferencia. Cuando los príncipes reciben a alguien, y esto lo sé por papá, siempre se visten con el traje del país del invitado. Así que no hay de que preocuparse… Deprisa, voy a esconderme, y aquí en el banco es casa.

Hulda intentó objetar algo, pero Effi ya había salido corriendo por el camino de gravilla más próximo, zigzagueando a izquierda y derecha, hasta que de repente desapareció.

—Effi, eso no vale. ¿Dónde estás? No estamos jugando al escondite, estamos jugando a pillar.

Y entre estas y parecidas protestas, las amigas salieron en su búsqueda hasta más allá de la rotonda y el par de plátanos que se erguían a uno de los lados, hasta que de pronto la desaparecida surgió de su escondite y sin esfuerzo, ya que sus perseguidoras habían pasado sin verla, alcanzó con un «un, dos, tres, salvada» la casa del banco.

—¿Dónde estabas?

—Detrás de los macizos de ruibarbo; tienen unas hojas muy grandes, mayores que las de las higueras…

—Eso no vale.

—No vale porque habéis perdido. Hulda, con esos ojos tan grandes, tampoco me ha visto, tan torpe como siempre.

Y Effi echó a correr de nuevo a través de la rotonda hacia el estanque, tal vez con la intención de esconderse tras el espeso seto de avellanos que allí había, para después, dando un largo rodeo alrededor del cementerio y la fachada principal, llegar de nuevo al ala lateral y salvarse. Lo tenía todo muy bien calculado; pero justo cuando se disponía a rodear el estanque oyó que la llamaban desde casa, y al volverse vio a su madre, que desde la escalera le hacía señas con un pañuelito. En un instante, Effi estuvo a su lado.

—Aún estás sin arreglar y la visita ya ha llegado. No hay manera de que seas puntual.

—Yo sí que soy puntual, quien no es puntual es la visita. Todavía falta mucho para la una. —Y volviéndose hacia las gemelas (Hulda se había quedado rezagada), les gritó—: Continuad jugando;

enseguida vuelvo.

Al cabo de un momento Effi entraba con su madre en una amplia sala, a modo de jardín de invierno, que ocupaba casi toda la extensión del ala lateral.

—No debes reñirme, mamá. No son más que las doce y media. ¿Por qué ha venido tan temprano? Los caballeros nunca han de llegar tarde, pero tampoco deben presentarse antes de hora.

La señora Von Briest estaba visiblemente azorada, así que Effi la abrazó cariñosamente y añadió:

—Perdona, voy a darme prisa; ya sabes que puedo ser muy rápida, y que en cinco minutos Cenicienta se habrá transformado en princesa. Entretanto puede esperar, o que charle con papá.

Y con un movimiento de cabeza y sonriendo a su madre, empezó a subir con aire decidido la escalera de hierro que conducía desde la sala al piso superior. Pero la señora Von Briest, que en determinadas circunstancias también sabía prescindir de convencionalismos, detuvo de pronto a la presurosa Effi y examinó con la mirada a la encantadora criatura que, acalorada todavía por la agitación del juego, se presentaba ante ella como una imagen de la vida en toda su lozanía. Y, en un tono casi de confidencia, le dijo:

—Después de todo, es mejor que no te cambies. Sí, quédate como estás. Tienes un aspecto encantador. Y aunque no fuese así, das una impresión de naturalidad, de espontaneidad, que es lo que más conviene a este momento. Porque has de saber, mi querida Effi… —y tomó entre sus manos las de su hija—, tengo que decirte…

—Pero, mamá, ¿qué te pasa? Me estás asustando.

—… tengo que decirte, Effi, que el barón Innstetten acaba de pedir tu mano.

—¿Ha pedido mi mano? ¿En serio?

—No es esta una cosa que se preste a bromas. Ya le viste anteayer, y creo que también te gustó. Está claro que es mayor que tú, lo cual, a fin de cuentas, no deja de ser algo bueno. Se trata además de un hombre de carácter, de buena posición y de buenas costumbres, y si tú no te niegas, cosa que difícilmente podría esperar de alguien tan inteligente como tú, con veinte años te encontrarás en una situación que otras no consiguen hasta los cuarenta. Habrás llegado mucho más lejos que tu mamá.

Effi callaba, buscando una contestación. Pero, antes de poder hallarla, oyó la voz de su padre en la habitación contigua, situada en la parte de atrás del edificio principal, y al cabo de un momento cruzaba el umbral del invernáculo el diputado Von Briest, un quincuagenario bien conservado y de aspecto jovial… acompañado por el barón Innstetten, delgado, de cabello oscuro y con un aire muy marcial.

Al verle Effi se sintió presa de un temblor nervioso, pero no por mucho tiempo, porque justo cuando el barón se aproximaba a ella con una afable inclinación, aparecieron en uno de aquellos ventanales, abiertos de par en par y medio cubiertos por las hojas de parra, las rojizas cabezas de las gemelas, y en toda la sala resonó la voz de Hertha, la más descarada de ellas, gritando:

—¡Effi, ven!

Enseguida agachó la cabeza, y las dos hermanas saltaron de nuevo al jardín desde el respaldo del banco al que se habían subido, y ya sólo se oyeron sus murmullos y risas ahogadas.

3

Ese mismo día el barón Innstetten y Effi Briest se prometieron. Durante la comida de compromiso que siguió, el jovial padre de la muchacha, que no se hallaba del todo a gusto en su solemne papel, brindó a la salud de la joven pareja, y la señora Von Briest, a la que probablemente le venían recuerdos de dieciocho años atrás, no pudo evitar emocionarse. Pero no le duró mucho tiempo: lo que entonces no había podido ser con ella, sería ahora con su hija… En cualquier caso daba igual, o incluso era mejor así, ya que con Briest la vida era muy llevadera, pese a ser un tanto prosaico y caer de vez en cuando en la frivolidad. Hacia el final de la comida, después de que sirvieran el helado, volvió a tomar la palabra el viejo jefe de distrito para proponer, en una nueva alocución, que toda la familia se tuteara. Abrazó luego a Innstetten y le dio un beso en la mejilla izquierda. Pero con eso no dio por concluida la cuestión, ya que siguió recomendando, aparte del tuteo, otros nombres y títulos más íntimos para el trato hogareño, una especie de lista jerárquica de familiaridades que respetaba naturalmente las particularidades y derechos establecidos de cada cual. A su mujer, según él, sería preferible seguir llamándola «mamá» (pues hay también mamás jóvenes), mientras que en lo referente a su persona estaba dispuesto a renunciar al honroso título de «papá» y se decantaba decididamente por el de Briest a secas, aunque sólo fuese porque resultaba agradable en su brevedad. Y en cuanto a los chicos —y al pronunciar esta palabra, mirando de frente a Innstetten, al que apenas llevaba una docena de años, se obligó a proseguir rápidamente—, bien, Effi continuaría siendo Effi y Geert, Geert. Si no estaba equivocado, Geert significaba un tronco esbelto y recto, y por tanto Effi sería la hiedra que crece a su alrededor. Los novios se miraron algo desconcertados al escuchar este juego de palabras con el significado de sus nombres, que en Effi provocó al mismo tiempo una expresión de pueril regocijo. Pero la señora de Briest intervino:

—Briest, puedes decir cuanto quieras y proponer los brindis como mejor te parezca, pero te recomiendo que prescindas de imágenes poéticas. Eso sobrepasa tu esfera.

Estas palabras reprobatorias hallaron en Briest más aceptación que repulsa.

—Puede que tengas razón, Luise.

En cuanto se levantaron de la mesa, Effi se despidió enseguida para ir a hacer una visita a casa del pastor. Por el camino iba pensando: «Creo que a Hulda le sentará mal. Al final voy a lograrlo antes que ella. Siempre ha sido una vanidosa y una presumida». Pero, en contra de lo esperado, Hulda mantuvo la compostura y se tomó muy bien la noticia. Las muestras de rabia y despecho corrieron a cargo de la madre, la esposa del pastor, con unos comentarios a todas luces extraños e inconvenientes.

—¡Ya, ya! ¡Así es como van las cosas, está claro! Como no ha podido ser con la madre, ha de ser con la hija. Ya se sabe. El dinero llama al dinero, y las viejas familias se entienden entre ellas.

El viejo Niemeyer se sintió profundamente violento a causa de la incesante y mordaz palabrería de su esposa, carente de toda educación y decoro, y una vez más maldijo la hora en que había tenido la ocurrencia de casarse con una sirvienta.

Como es natural, desde la casa del pastor Effi se dirigió a la casa del maestro Jahnke; las gemelas la habían visto venir y ya la esperaban en el jardín que se extendía delante de la casa.

—Y bien, Effi… —dijo Hertha mientras paseaban por entre las matas de pensamientos que florecían a un lado y otro del sendero—. Bueno, Effi, ¿cómo te sientes?

—¿Cómo me siento? ¡Oh, muy bien! Ya nos tuteamos y nos llamamos por el nombre. El suyo es Geert, pero creo recordar que ya os lo había dicho.

—Sí, ya nos lo habías dicho. Pero a mí me inspira cierto recelo. ¿Estás segura de que es el hombre adecuado?

—Pues claro que es el adecuado. Tú no lo entiendes, Hertha. Cualquiera puede ser el adecuado, siempre que tenga, claro está, un título nobiliario, una buena posición y una buena planta.

—Dios mío, Effi, qué manera de hablar. Antes te expresabas de un modo muy distinto.

—Sí, antes sí.

—¿Y te sientes muy feliz?

—Cuando hace dos horas que se está prometida, una siempre es muy feliz. Al menos eso creo yo.

—¿Y no te sientes un poco… cómo lo diría… un poco azorada?

—Sí, un poco azorada sí me siento, pero no mucho. Y supongo que ya se me pasará.

Después de las visitas a las casas del pastor y del maestro, en las que apenas había invertido media hora, Effi regresó a la mansión justo cuando se disponían a tomar el café en la terraza del jardín. Suegro y yerno paseaban por el sendero de grava entre los dos plátanos. Briest hablaba de las dificultades del cargo de gobernador provincial. A él se lo habían ofrecido repetidas veces, pero siempre lo había rechazado.

—Lo que más aprecio en la vida es poder hacer y deshacer a mi antojo; me resulta más grato, y perdóname, Innstetten, que tener que estar constantemente mirando a las alturas. Siempre pendiente de lo que digan y piensen tus superiores, y sobre todo de quienes les mandan. Eso no va conmigo. Aquí vivo mi vida libremente, disfrutando de cada una de estas hojas verdes que retoñan y del emparrado que se encarama allá arriba en las ventanas.

Siguió hablando durante un largo rato contra la burocracia y la política, excusándose de vez en cuando con un breve y recurrente «y perdóname, Innstetten». Este asentía mecánicamente con la cabeza, pero en realidad no prestaba atención a la charla de su interlocutor, sino que dirigía la mirada a cada instante, casi de forma obsesiva, hacia el emparrado que Briest acababa de nombrar, y le parecía volver a ver entre los pámpanos las cabezas rojizas de las dos muchachas y a escuchar de nuevo la traviesa llamada: «¡Effi, ven!».

No creía en presagios ni cosas por el estilo; al contrario, rechazaba por completo cualquier tipo de superstición. Sin embargo, no conseguía librarse del influjo que aquellas dos palabras ejercían en su ánimo, y mientras Briest seguía enfrascado en su perorata, no le abandonaba el presentimiento de que, pese a todo, aquel pequeño incidente representaba algo más que una mera casualidad.

Innstetten, que tan sólo disponía de un corto permiso, tuvo que emprender el regreso al día siguiente, no sin antes prometerle a Effi que le escribiría a diario.

—Sí, debes hacerlo —había dicho esta, unas palabras que le salieron del corazón, pues hacía años que no encontraba nada tan agradable como recibir muchas cartas de felicitación, por ejemplo para su cumpleaños.

Las expresiones en una carta del tipo «Gertrudis y Clara me dicen que te envíe sus más cariñosas felicitaciones» le parecían imperdonables; si Gertrudis y Clara querían ser sus amigas, tenían que preocuparse de enviar sus propias cartas debidamente franqueadas, a ser posible desde el extranjero, desde Suiza o Karlsbad, ya que su cumpleaños caía en la época del veraneo.

Tal como había prometido, Innstetten le escribía a diario, pero lo que hacía especialmente gratas aquellas misivas era la circunstancia de que, en respuesta, él sólo esperaba una pequeña carta semanal, que el barón recibía puntualmente y que estaba llena de encantadoras banalidades que él encontraba deliciosas. Todos los asuntos serios eran tratados por la señora Von Briest y su yerno: los preparativos de la boda y los detalles del ajuar y demás cuestiones domésticas. Durante los tres años que llevaba desempeñando el cargo, Innstetten había instalado su casa de Kessin sin lujos, aunque de un modo acorde a su posición, y convenía que la correspondencia con él mantenida sirviera para hacerse una idea de todo lo que allí había, a fin de evitar la adquisición de cosas innecesarias. Finalmente, cuando la señora Von Briest estuvo informada acerca de todos los detalles, madre e hija decidieron viajar a Berlín para, según palabras de Briest, adquirir el *trousseau* de la princesa Effi. Esta estaba muy ilusionada con la proyectada estancia en la capital, sobre todo desde que el padre había consentido que se alojaran en el Hôtel du Nord.

—Lo que cueste puede deducirse luego de la dotación doméstica, porque Innstetten ya tiene de todo.

Effi, contrariamente a su madre, que no soportaba tales mezquindades, asintió jubilosamente sin preocuparse de si su padre había dicho aquello en broma o en serio; sus pensamientos estaban más ocupados imaginando la impresión que madre e hija causarían al entrar en el comedor del hotel, que por el ajuar que habrían de adquirir en los almacenes Spinn und Mencke, Goschenhofer y otros por el estilo. A estas alegres fantasías correspondió su comportamiento durante la gran semana que pasaron en Berlín. El primo Briest, un joven teniente del regimiento Alexander extremadamente sociable, que estaba suscrito a la revista satírica *Fliegenden Blätter* y coleccionaba sus mejores chistes, se puso a disposición de las dos damas durante las horas que el servicio le dejaba libres. Acompañadas por él solían sentarse ante uno de los céntricos ventanales del Kanzler o incluso, siempre que no fuese demasiado tarde, en el Café Bauer; por la tarde iban al jardín zoológico para contemplar las jirafas, de las que el primo Briest, que por cierto se

llamaba Dagobert, repetía que «parecían viejas solteronas aristocráticas». Cada día transcurría conforme a un plan establecido, y al tercero o cuarto día fueron a la Galería Nacional, ya que el primo Dagobert quería enseñar a su prima el escandaloso cuadro *La isla de los bienaventurados*.

—Ya sé que mi señorita prima está a punto de casarse, pero tal vez sea conveniente que conozca antes *La isla de los bienaventurados*.

La tía le dio un golpecito con el abanico, pero acompañado de una mirada tan indulgente que no la interpretó como que hubiese de cambiar de tono. Fueron unos días deliciosos para los tres, también para el primo, que no sólo fue un magnífico guía, sino que supo mediar con prontitud en cuanto surgía algún pequeño conflicto. Aunque las divergencias de opinión entre madre e hija fueron constantes, afortunadamente no llegaron a aflorar durante las numerosas compras que tuvieron que realizar. A Effi le daba exactamente igual que de una cosa se compraran seis o tres docenas, y cuando de camino al hotel hablaban de los objetos adquiridos solía confundir los precios. La señora Von Briest, por lo general tan meticulosa a la hora de criticar las faltas, incluidas las de su hija, no sólo se tomó a bien esta aparente falta de interés, sino que la consideró además meritoria. «Todas estas cosas —se decía— no significan nada para Effi. No es ambiciosa, vive en sus fantasías y en sus sueños, y si pasa la esposa del príncipe Federico Carlos y nos hace una seña amistosa desde el coche, esto posee para ella más valor que todo un baúl de ropa blanca».

Y era verdad, pero sólo a medias. Ciertamente no ponía especial interés en poseer más o menos cosas de uso cotidiano. Pero cuando recorrían de arriba abajo la avenida Unter den Linden y, tras haber examinado los escaparates más hermosos, entraban finalmente en Demuth a fin de comprar todo lo necesario para el viaje a Italia que los novios harían inmediatamente después de la boda, era cuando se revelaba el auténtico carácter de Effi. Tan sólo le gustaba lo más elegante, y si no podía conseguirlo renunciaba a lo de calidad más modesta, pues si no era lo mejor ya no le interesaba para nada. Sí, poseía una gran capacidad de renuncia, en la cual —y en eso tenía razón su madre— había algo de modestia; pero cuando excepcionalmente se le antojaba algo de verdad, entonces debía de ser de la más alta calidad. Y en eso sí se mostraba exigente.



4

El primo Dagobert estaba en la estación cuando las damas emprendieron el viaje de regreso a Hohen-Cremmen. Habían pasado juntos unos días muy dichosos, entre otras cosas por haber conseguido librarse de la incómoda presencia de parientes importunos.

—Para la tía Therese —había dicho Effi a su llegada—, en esta ocasión debemos estar de incógnito. No conviene que venga aquí, al hotel. O el Hôtel du Nord o la tía Therese: ambas cosas a la vez es imposible.

La madre acabó por mostrarse totalmente de acuerdo, e incluso selló su aprobación besando en la frente a su adorada hija.

Lo del primo Dagobert era, desde luego, algo completamente distinto. No sólo poseía elegantes maneras, sino que ante todo había sabido distraer y alegrar desde un principio a madre e hija, merced a aquel peculiar buen humor ya casi legendario entre los oficiales del regimiento Alexander, y había logrado que el buen ambiente reinara hasta el final.

—Dagobert —le dijo Effi mientras se despedían—, te espero para mi fiesta de vísperas de boda, y naturalmente con *cortège*. No vayas a venir acompañado de cuatro pelagatos, porque después de la ceremonia habrá baile, y debes tener en cuenta que será mi primera gran fiesta y, tal vez, la última. Así que, si no traes contigo al menos a seis de tus camaradas, y que sean además excelentes bailarines, no pienso recibirte. Y ya podéis volveros en el tren de madrugada.

El primo asintió a todo, y luego se separaron.

Hacia mediodía llegaban las dos damas a su estación de Havelland, en plena marisma, y tras media hora de coche entraban en Hohen-Cremmen. El diputado Briest se mostró sumamente alegre por volver a tener en el hogar a su esposa e hija, a las que iba haciendo una pregunta tras otra sin esperar apenas contestación. En lugar de eso se extendía en explicaciones sobre los acontecimientos ocurridos mientras tanto en la finca.

—Antes me habéis hablado de la Galería Nacional y de *La isla de los bienaventurados*. Pues bien, en vuestra ausencia también nosotros hemos tenido aquí algo de eso: nuestro capataz Pink y la mujer del jardinero. Por supuesto, he tenido que despedir a Pink, aunque no me haya hecho mucha gracia. Es una desgracia que estas cosas hayan de ocurrir precisamente en época de cosecha. Y Pink era un hombre extraordinariamente trabajador, lástima que en esta ocasión se haya propasado. Pero dejemos eso… Wilke debe de estar ya impaciente.

Durante la comida, Briest prestó más atención a lo que las damas le contaban. La magnífica relación con el primo, de la que se habló largo y tendido, mereció su completa aprobación, no así el comportamiento mostrado con la tía Therese. Con todo, aunque no le pareciera bien, se veía claramente que en el fondo le hacía gracia, porque aquel tipo de travesuras eran muy de su gusto, y la tía Therese era realmente un personaje grotesco. Levantó su vaso y brindó por su esposa y su hija. Una vez que acabaron de comer, desempaquetaron ante él algunas de las compras más bonitas para pedirle su opinión. También en esto mostró un marcado interés, que se mantuvo, o al menos no cayó del todo, cuando se puso a repasar las cuentas.

—Algo caro… mejor dicho, carísimo, pero no importa. Es todo tan chic, tan… estimulante, que creo que si para Navidad me regalas unas maletas y una manta de viaje como estas, puede que por Pascua también nosotros vayamos a Roma. Podríamos celebrar nuestro viaje de novios dieciocho años después. ¿Qué te parece, Luise? ¿Nos animamos? Mejor tarde que nunca…

La señora Von Briest hizo un gesto con la mano como diciendo «Incorregible», dejando que él mismo se abandonase a su propia vergüenza, que, a decir verdad, no fue mucha.

Languidecía el mes de agosto, y el día de la boda, el 3 de octubre, se iba acercando. Y tanto en la casa

solariega como en la parroquia y en la escuela no cesaban los preparativos. A Jahnke, fiel a su pasión por Fritz Reuter, se le ocurrió la idea, según él «especialmente ingeniosa», de que Bertha y Hertha representaran los papeles de Lining y Mining, naturalmente en dialecto; a Hulda le había asignado el de Kätchen von Heilbronn en la escena del saúco, con el teniente de húsares Engelbrecht haciendo de Wetter von Strahl. Niemeyer, quien se atribuía la paternidad de la idea, no dudó un momento en reescribir la escena como una púdica moraleja dirigida a Innstetten y a Effi. Se sentía muy satisfecho de su propia obra, y después del ensayo recibió muchos comentarios elogiosos por parte de todos los asistentes, a excepción, claro está, de su benefactor y viejo amigo Briest, quien protestó airadamente, y no por razones literarias, al oír aquella mezcolanza de Kleist y de Niemeyer.

—«Mi señor»… ¿Qué significa eso? Induce a error, lo tergiversa todo. Innstetten, de eso no hay duda, es un hombre ejemplar, un modelo de carácter y de integridad. Pero los Briest, y perdóname el berlinismo, Luise, los Briest no hemos salido del arroyo. Nosotros somos una familia histórica, y permitidme que añada que a Dios gracias, y los Innstetten no. Los Innstetten son, si me apuráis, un linaje antiguo, de vieja aristocracia, pero ¿qué quiere decir vieja aristocracia? No pienso consentir que una Briest, ni tan siquiera un personaje de retablo en el que todo el mundo verá el reflejo de nuestra Effi… no pienso consentir que una Briest, ya sea en persona o en personaje, trate a nadie de «mi señor». Para eso haría falta que Innstetten fuera, como mínimo, un Hohenzollern no reconocido, que los hay. Pero este no es el caso, así que me limito a repetir que esto lo tergiversa todo.

Y Briest siguió aferrado con obstinación durante un tiempo a este punto de vista. No fue hasta después del segundo ensayo, en el que «Kätchen» aparecía ya medio caracterizada con un ceñido corpiño de terciopelo, cuando se sintió impelido —nunca escatimaba elogios en favor de Hulda— a hacer la siguiente observación, «Kätchen está muy bien», un viraje que equivalía prácticamente a una rendición o que, al menos, conducía a ella.

Ni que decir tiene que todo esto se llevaba en secreto con respecto a Effi, lo cual hubiera sido del todo imposible si esta hubiese mostrado un poco de curiosidad. Sin embargo, Effi sentía muy poco interés por los preparativos y las sorpresas planeadas. Ya se lo había dicho a su mamá de forma rotunda:

—Lo veré todo cuando llegue el momento; entretanto, puedo esperar tranquilamente.

Y como la madre expresara sus dudas, Effi volvió a asegurarle que así era, que debía creerla. A fin de cuentas, se trataba de una simple función de teatro. Y más hermosa y poética que *La Cenicienta*, que habían visto durante su última noche en Berlín, más bella y más poética, repitió, no podía ser. En esa obra sí que le hubiera gustado a ella actuar, aunque no fuese más que para pintarle una raya de tiza en la espalda al ridículo profesor del internado.

—Y qué emocionante el último acto. El despertar de Cenicienta convertida en princesa, o al menos en condesa; parecía realmente un cuento de hadas.

Ahora hablaba a menudo de este modo, solía mostrarse más animada y expresiva, y sólo la enojaban el continuo cuchichear y el secreteo que se traían las amigas.

—Me gustaría que no se diesen tanta importancia y que estuviesen más por mí. Luego, cuando se olviden de sus frases y no sepan seguir, tendré que sufrir por ellas y avergonzarme de que sean mis amigas.

Tales eran las irónicas observaciones de Effi, y resultaba evidente que ni la fiesta de vigilia ni la boda en sí la interesaban demasiado. Aquella actitud daba que pensar a la señora Von Briest, quien sin embargo no llegó a inquietarse, porque Effi —y eso era buena señal— se preocupaba bastante de su porvenir, y, fantasiosa como era, se explayaba durante horas imaginando cómo sería su vida en Kessin, con unas descripciones que, para gran diversión de su madre, revelaban una muy curiosa noción de la Pomerania Oriental. Se complacía en describir Kessin, tal vez de forma inteligentemente calculada, como un lugar casi siberiano, de hielos y nieves poco menos que perpetuos.

—Hoy ha llegado el último envío de los almacenes Goschenhofer —dijo la señora Von Briest, sentada como de costumbre con Effi a la mesa de labor de la galería lateral, sobre la cual se iban acumulando las piezas de lencería y ropa blanca que iban dejando sin espacio a los cada vez más escasos periódicos—. Creo que ya lo tienes todo, Effi. Pero si todavía deseas algún pequeño capricho, debes decirlo ahora, a ser posible ya, pues papá ha vendido muy bien la cosecha de colza y está de un buen humor inusitado.

—¿Inusitado? Él siempre está de buen humor.

—De un buen humor inusitado —recalcó la madre—. Y hay que aprovecharlo. Así que dime: durante nuestra estancia en Berlín, en varias ocasiones me dio la impresión de que te quedaron por comprar algunas cosas que te hacían especial ilusión.

—Qué quieres que te diga, mamá querida. En realidad ya tengo todo lo que se necesita, quiero decir, lo que se necesita aquí. Pero como por lo visto estoy destinada a irme tan al norte… y que conste que no me

parece mal, al contrario, estoy deseando poder contemplar las luces del norte y el resplandor más claro de las estrellas… como al parecer estoy destinada a ir allí, me hubiera gustado tener un abrigo de pieles.

—Pero Effi, hija mía, eso es una auténtica locura sin sentido. ¡Cualquiera diría que te marchas a San Petersburgo o a Arkángel!

—No, pero Kessin está camino de allí…

—Claro, hija mía, claro que está camino de allí… Pero eso no quiere decir nada. Cuando viajas de aquí a Nauen, también estás camino de Rusia. En fin, si lo que deseas es un abrigo de pieles, lo tendrás. Sin embargo, no te lo aconsejo. Llevar pieles es para personas de más edad, e incluso tu vieja madre es todavía demasiado joven para eso. Y si con tus diecisiete años te presentas allí con una piel de nutria o de marta, la gente de Kessin va a creer que vas disfrazada.

Esta conversación tuvo lugar el 2 de septiembre, y sin duda se hubiera prolongado si ese día no se celebrara la conmemoración de la victoria de Sedán. Así pues, la charla se vio interrumpida por el estridente sonido de pífanos y tambores, y Effi, que sabía que se preparaba un desfile pero lo había olvidado por completo, se levantó de un salto de la mesa de labor, atravesó a todo correr la rotonda y la orilla del estanque, y se dirigió hacia un pequeño mirador adosado al muro del camposanto, al cual se ascendía mediante seis pequeños escalones no mucho más anchos que los travesaños de una escala de mano. En un santiamén estaba ya arriba, justo en el momento en que se acercaban en formación todos los chicos de la escuela, conducidos por Jahnke, muy solemne a la derecha del grupo, y precedidos de un pequeño tambor mayor en cuyo rostro se pintaba la expresión de un combatiente que marchase a luchar de nuevo a Sedán. Effi le saludó agitando el pañuelo, y él no dudó en responderle con un contenido pero enérgico movimiento de su reluciente baqueta.

Una semana más tarde, madre e hija volvían a estar sentadas en su rincón habitual, entregadas como de costumbre a su tarea. Hacía un día magnífico; el heliotropo que crecía en un hermoso parterre en torno al reloj de sol todavía estaba en flor, y una ligera brisa llevaba su aroma hasta ellas.

—¡Ah, qué bien me siento aquí! —dijo Effi—. Me siento tan bien y tan feliz que no imagino que ni en el cielo se pueda estar mejor. Y, además, quién sabe si en el cielo habrá un heliotropo tan maravilloso como este.

—Pero Effi, hija, no debes hablar de esa manera; en eso has salido a tu padre, para quien nada sagrado existe, y quien el otro día tuvo hasta el atrevimiento de decir que Niemeyer se parecía a Lot. ¡Habráse visto! Además, ¿qué significa eso? En primer lugar, él no sabe cómo era Lot, y en segundo lugar, es una enorme falta de respeto hacia Hulda. Suerte que Niemeyer tiene una sola hija, lo cual da al traste con su comparación. En una cosa sí tenía razón: en todo cuanto dijo acerca de «la mujer de Lot», la esposa de nuestro buen pastor, quien con su comportamiento necio y pretencioso volvió a estropearnos la fiesta de Sedán. Y esto me trae a la memoria la conversación que manteníamos cuando nos interrumpió el desfile de Jahnke con los chicos de la escuela… Supongo que el abrigo de pieles del que me hablaste no es tu único deseo.

¿Por qué no le cuentas a tu madre, tesoro mío, qué otras cosas te harían ilusión?

—Nada, mamá.

—¿Nada, en serio?

—Nada, de verdad. Aunque bueno… si tuviera que elegir algo…

—Sería…

—Un biombo japonés con pájaros negros y dorados, con largos picos como grullas… y tal vez una lámpara para nuestro dormitorio, con una tulipa de luz roja.

La señora Von Briest guardó silencio.

—¿Lo ves, mamá? Ahora te quedas callada y pones una cara como si hubiera dicho alguna inconveniencia.

—No, Effi, no es ninguna inconveniencia. Y menos delante de tu madre. Porque yo te conozco. Eres una personita fantasiosa, y te gusta imaginarte tu futuro como una serie de escenas que, cuanto más colorido les pones, más lindas y deseables te parecen. Me di cuenta de ello cuando comprábamos las cosas para el viaje. Y ahora te figuras que sería maravilloso poseer un biombo con toda clase de animales fabulosos, bañado en la luz mortecina de una lámpara rojiza. Te lo imaginas como un cuento de hadas, y tú quieres ser la princesa de ese cuento.

Effi tomó la mano de su madre y la besó.

—Sí, mamá, yo soy así.

—Sí, así eres tú, hija mía. Lo sé muy bien. Pero, mi querida Effi, en la vida debemos ser prudentes, sobre todo nosotras, las mujeres. En un lugar pequeño como Kessin, donde por las noches apenas se puede ver un farol encendido, se reirían de una cosa así. ¡Y si sólo se contentaran con reírse…! Los que no te tengan simpatía, y de estos nunca faltan, hablarán de mala educación, y algunos pueden llegar incluso a decir cosas peores.

—Pues entonces, nada de biombo japonés, ni tampoco de lámparas. Pero debo confesarte que me había imaginado que sería muy bonito y poético verlo todo bajo un resplandor rojizo.

La señora Von Briest se sintió conmovida. Se puso en pie y besó a Effi.

—Eres una niña. Hermosa y poética. Eso no son más que fantasías. La realidad es muy distinta, y muchas veces es preferible que, en lugar de luz y resplandor, haya sólo oscuridad.

Parecía que Effi se disponía a contestar cuando llegó Wilke con las cartas. Una era de Innstetten, desde Kessin.

—Ah, de Geert —dijo Effi y, tras guardársela en un bolsillo, continuó hablando tranquilamente—: Pero tendrás que permitirme que coloque el piano en diagonal en la sala. Eso es más importante para mí que la chimenea que Geert me ha prometido. Y tu retrato lo pondré sobre un caballete; no podría estar del todo sin ti. ¡Ah, cuánto voy a añoraros! Tal vez ya durante el viaje, y una vez en Kessin ni te digo. Por lo visto, allí no hay ninguna guarnición, ni siquiera un médico militar, y suerte que al menos es una estación balnearia. El primo Briest, y eso me consuela un poco, siempre envía a su madre y a su hermana a Warnemünde, y lo cierto es que no veo por qué no podría destinarlas alguna vez a Kessin. Eso de «destinarlas» suena muy a Estado Mayor, que es a lo que él, si no me equivoco, ambiciona llegar. Y entonces, claro está, podría venir él también y quedarse en casa con nosotros. Además, hace poco me han contado que Kessin dispone de un vapor bastante grande que hace la ruta a Suecia dos veces por semana. Y en ese barco hay baile, naturalmente con su orquesta, y él baila muy bien…

—¿Quién?

—Pues Dagobert.

—Creí que te referías a Innstetten. En fin, creo que ya es hora de saber lo que te dice… Todavía tienes la carta en el bolsillo.

—Es verdad. Casi lo había olvidado. Abrió la carta y le echó un rápido vistazo.

—Y bien, Effi, ¿no dices nada? No veo que te alegres, ni siquiera que sonrías. Y eso que sus cartas son siempre muy divertidas, sin ningún aire de seriedad o paternalismo.

—Es que yo tampoco se lo consentiría. Él tiene su edad y yo mi juventud. Le amenazaría con el dedo y le diría: «Geert, piénsatelo bien, a ver qué es mejor».

—Y él te contestaría: «Lo tuyo, Effi, es siempre lo mejor». Pues es no sólo un hombre de exquisitas maneras, sino además justo y comprensivo, y sabe muy bien lo que significa ser joven. Es algo que siempre dice, y procura mantenerse en sintonía con la juventud. Si sigue así después de casados, seréis un matrimonio ejemplar.

—Así lo creo yo también, mamá. Pero… ¿sabes una cosa? Casi me avergüenza decirlo, pero lo cierto es que no estoy muy a favor de eso que llaman un matrimonio ejemplar.

—No me extraña, viniendo de ti. Y entonces dime: ¿de qué estás a favor exactamente?

—Bueno, pues… estoy a favor de la afinidad y de compartirlo todo, y naturalmente también de la ternura y el amor. Y si la ternura y el amor no pueden ser, porque, como dice papá, el amor no son más que bobadas, aunque a mí no me lo parezca, pues entonces estoy a favor de la riqueza y de una casa distinguida, muy distinguida, a la que el príncipe Federico Carlos vaya a cazar alces y urogallos, y en la que también se hospede a su paso el viejo káiser y tenga para cada dama, incluso para las más jóvenes, una palabra amable. Y cuando estemos en Berlín, entonces estoy a favor de los bailes de la corte y de las funciones de gala en la ópera, siempre muy cerca del palco imperial.

—¿Lo dices llevada por tus fantasías, o simplemente estás de broma?

—No, mamá, lo digo muy en serio. Lo más importante es el amor, pero inmediatamente después están el brillo y los honores, y luego la diversión; sí, distraerme siempre con cosas nuevas, algo que me haga reír o llorar. Lo que no puedo soportar es el aburrimiento.

—¿Y cómo has podido vivir entonces con nosotros?

—Oh, mamá, ¿cómo puedes decir algo así? Está claro que en invierno, cuando se presentan nuestros queridos parientes y se quedan unas seis horas, y a veces más, y la tía Gundel y la tía Olga me pasan revista de arriba abajo y me encuentran insolente (la tía Gundel así me lo ha dicho), entonces sí, debo reconocer,

que no me hace mucha gracia. Pero, por lo demás, aquí siempre he sido muy feliz, tan feliz…

Y al decir esto, se arrodilló entre grandes sollozos a los pies su madre y le besó las manos.

—Levántate, Effi. Estos estados de ánimo son naturales en las jóvenes que, como tú, están a punto de casarse y se enfrentan a un futuro lleno de incertidumbre. Y ahora léeme la carta, si es que no contiene nada de particular, o tal vez algún secreto.

—¡Secretos! —Effi se echó a reír y se puso en pie con un humor totalmente cambiado—. ¡Secretos! Sí, a veces parece como si se lanzara un poco, pero por lo general todo lo que sigue podría colgarse en el tablón de edictos del ayuntamiento. Después de todo, Geert es gobernador.

—Vamos, lee.

—«Querida Effi…». Así comienza siempre, y a veces me llama también su «pequeña Eva».

—Venga, lee. Sigue leyendo.

—Está bien…

Querida Effi:

Cuanto más se acerca el día de nuestra boda, más escasas son tus cartas. Cada vez que llega el correo, lo primero que busco siempre es tu letra, pero como bien sabes (y no pretendo que sea de otro modo) la mayoría de las veces en vano. Ahora tenemos en casa a los operarios, que están preparando las habitaciones, unas cuantas, para cuando tú llegues. La obra más grande y delicada se hará mientras estemos de viaje. El decorador Madelung, que lo provee todo, es un tipo muy original. Ya te hablaré de él en mis próximas cartas, pero lo que quiero que sepas ante todo es lo feliz que me hace tenerte, mi dulce, pequeña Effi. Ardo en impaciencia por tenerte a mi lado para siempre. Por lo demás, nuestra querida ciudad se va quedando cada vez más tranquila y solitaria. El último bañista se marchó ayer; últimamente se bañaba a nueve grados, y los socorristas suspiraban de alivio cada vez que le veían salir del agua sano y salvo, porque temían que le diese algún ataque al corazón que pudiese desprestigiar nuestro balneario… como si las olas aquí fueran más peligrosas que en otras partes. Me llena de júbilo pensar que dentro de cuatro semanas estaré contigo viajando desde la Piazetta al Lido o a Murano, donde elaboran perlas de cristal y preciosas joyas. Y la más hermosa será para ti.

Saluda a tus padres, y para ti el beso más dulce de tu

GEERT

Effi dobló la hoja para introducirla nuevamente en el sobre.

—Es una carta muy bonita —dijo la señora Von Briest—, y el hecho de que se muestre tan mesurado es un mérito añadido a sus otras cualidades.

—Oh, sí, mesurado sí que es.

—Mi querida Effi, déjame que te haga una pregunta: ¿te gustaría que la carta no fuese tan mesurada, que fuese más afectuosa, más apasionada?

—No, no, mamá. De verdad, en serio, no me gustaría. Es mejor así.

—«Es mejor así». ¡Lo dices de una manera…! Eres muy extraña. Hace un momento llorabas. ¿Es que ocultas algo en tu corazón? Todavía estamos a tiempo. ¿No amas a Geert?

—¿Y por qué no habría de amarle? Quiero a Hulda, y quiero a Bertha y a Hertha. Y también quiero al viejo Niemeyer. Ni que decir tiene que os amo a vosotros. Amo a todos aquellos que son buenos conmigo y me miman. Y seguro que Geert me mimará también. Ya me quiere regalar una joya en Venecia. Lo que él no sabe es que las joyas me traen sin cuidado. Prefiero trepar a los árboles y columpiarme, y tener esa sensación de temor, temor a que algo se rompa y pueda caerme. Lo cual no quiere decir que tenga que abrirme la cabeza.

—¿Y también quieres a tu primo Briest?

—Sí, mucho. Me pone siempre de muy buen humor.

—¿Y te hubiera gustado casarte con él?

—¿Casarme? Por Dios, no. Es todavía un jovenzuelo. Geert es un hombre, un hombre apuesto, al lado del cual puedo tener una posición y que llegará a ser alguien en la vida.

¿Qué te estás imaginando, mamá?

—Está bien, Effi, me alegra oírte hablar así. Pero queda algo en el fondo de tu corazón que aún no me has contado.

—Tal vez.

—Pues dime qué es.

—Mira, mamá, que sea mayor que yo no es ningún inconveniente, tal vez sea mejor. Además, no es ningún viejo, tiene salud y buena planta, y un aspecto marcial y elegante. Incluso te diré que podría

enamorarme de él, si sólo fuese… sí, si fuese un poco diferente.

—¿Cómo, Effi?

—¿Cómo…? Te lo diré, pero no te rías. Es algo que escuché hace poco en casa del pastor y que me dio que pensar. Estábamos hablando de Innstetten y de repente el viejo Niemeyer frunció la frente, pero con arrugas de admiración y respeto, y dijo: «¡Sí, el barón! He ahí un hombre de carácter, un hombre íntegro».

—Y es la verdad, Effi.

—Por supuesto. Y creo que Niemeyer añadió después que es un hombre de principios. Y eso me parece aún más fuerte. Porque yo… yo no tengo ninguno. Mira, mamá, hay algo en eso que me angustia y me atormenta. Él es muy bueno y amable, muy atento conmigo, y sin embargo… le tengo miedo.

5

Atrás quedaban ya los días de festejo en Hohen-Cremmen; todos se habían marchado, incluida la joven pareja, la misma noche de la boda.

La fiesta de la víspera había complacido a todos, en especial a los que habían participado en la función. Hulda dejó encantados a todos los jóvenes oficiales, tanto a los húsares de Rathenow como a los camaradas del regimiento Alexander, que tenían un mayor espíritu crítico. Sí, todo transcurrió como la seda, incluso mejor de lo que se esperaba. Salvo por el hecho de que Bertha y Hertha habían sollozado con tanto sentimiento que los versos en dialecto de Jahnke resultaron casi ininteligibles. Pero ni siquiera eso llegó a enturbiar la brillantez de la función, e incluso algunos refinados conocedores opinaron que «eso era lo auténtico: entrecortarse, sollozar y que no se entienda lo que estás diciendo… esa era la manera en que (y sobre todo tratándose de unas rizadas cabecitas tan lindas y rubicundas) se obtenían los más rotundos triunfos». Un triunfo extraordinario fue el que se apuntó también el primo Briest, en el papel que él mismo se había preparado. Se presentó como un dependiente de los elegantes almacenes Demuth que, enterado de que la joven novia pensaba viajar a Italia inmediatamente después de la ceremonia, venía a ofrecerle un maletín de viaje. Este resultó ser, naturalmente, una gigantesca bombonera de la casa Hövel. El baile se prolongó hasta las tres de la madrugada, y el viejo Briest, cada vez más hablador por los estimulantes efectos del champán, tuvo ocasión de hacer todo género de observaciones acerca de bailes como el de la antorcha, todavía habitual en algunas cortes, o la curiosa tradición del baile de las ligas de señora, observaciones que parecían no tener fin y que iban subiendo de tono, hasta que al fin hubo que ponerles freno.

—Compórtate, Briest —le susurró su esposa al oído en un tono bastante severo—. No estás aquí para hacer comentarios atrevidos, sino para hacer los honores de la casa. Estamos celebrando una boda, no una partida de caza.

A lo cual contestó Briest que él no veía gran diferencia, y que además se sentía muy feliz.

También el día mismo de la boda fue todo muy bien. Niemeyer había pronunciado un sermón magnífico, y uno de los viejos caballeros de Berlín, que pertenecía en cierto modo al círculo de la corte, había manifestado mientras regresaban de la iglesia que era notable que un estado como el nuestro estuviera tan sembrado de talentos.

—Veo en esto un triunfo de nuestras escuelas, y diré más, tal vez incluso de nuestra filosofía. Cuando pienso en este Niemeyer, un viejo párroco de aldea que al principio parecía un indigente… ¿no le parece, amigo mío, que ha hablado como un auténtico predicador de la corte? Qué tacto, qué manejo de la antítesis, exactamente igual que Kögel, e incluso superior en sentimiento. Kögel es demasiado frío. Aunque está claro que un hombre de su posición debe serlo. ¿Qué es lo que generalmente nos lleva a fracasar en la vida? ¡Es siempre el calor!

El dignatario a quien iban dirigidas estas palabras, un hombre todavía soltero pero que en ese momento iba ya por su cuarta «relación», naturalmente estuvo de acuerdo.

—Muy cierto, amigo mío —respondió—. ¡Demasiado calor…! Ha dado justo en el clavo… Por cierto, luego he de contarle una historia.

Al día siguiente de la boda amaneció un claro día otoñal. El sol matutino resplandecía, pero hacía ya un fresco propio de la estación, y Briest, que acababa de desayunar en compañía de su esposa, se levantó y se plantó con las manos a la espalda frente a la chimenea, cuyo fuego ya se estaba consumiendo. La señora Von Briest, con una pieza de labor en las manos, se acercó también a la chimenea y, dirigiéndose a Wilke, que acababa de entrar para despejar la mesa del desayuno, le ordenó:

—Ahora, Wilke, después de que haya ordenado toda la sala, haga que lleven la tarta de nueces al pastor

y la bandeja de pasteles a los Jahnke. Y tenga cuidado con la vajilla. Sobre todo con las copas de cristal.

Briest, que fumaba ya su tercer cigarrillo, tenía un excelente aspecto y declaró:

—Nada le sienta a uno tan bien como una boda, exceptuando, claro está, la propia.

—No sé cómo se te ocurren semejantes comentarios, Briest. No sabía que hubieses sufrido tanto en nuestra boda. Ni tampoco puedo imaginar por qué.

—No se puede bromear contigo, Luise. Suerte que yo me lo tomo todo bien, incluso tus cosas. Además, ¿quiénes somos nosotros para hablar, que ni siquiera hicimos el viaje de novios? Tu padre se opuso. Pero ahora Effi va a hacer su viaje de boda. Y la envidio. Salían en el tren de las diez. Deben de hallarse ya por Regensburg, y apuesto a que él, naturalmente sin apearse, le está explicando todo acerca de los tesoros artísticos del Valhalla. Innstetten es una excelente persona, pero es un maniático del arte, y Effi, oh, Dios… a nuestra pobre Effi lo que le gusta es la naturaleza. Temo que pueda atormentarla un poco con su entusiasmo por el arte.

—Todos los hombres atormentan a sus esposas de una manera u otra. Y el entusiasmo por el arte no es, ni con mucho, la peor.

—No, ciertamente no. Pero no discutamos por eso, sería el cuento de nunca acabar. Además, las personas somos tan distintas… A ti todo eso te hubiera encantado. A decir verdad, tú hubieras hecho mejor pareja con Innstetten que Effi. Lástima que ya sea un poco tarde.

—Un comentario muy galante, aunque bastante inapropiado. En cualquier caso, todo eso pertenece ya al pasado. Ahora él es mi yerno, y no tiene sentido seguir recordando cosas de la juventud.

—Tan sólo pretendía animarte un poco.

—Muy amable, pero no hace falta. Estoy muy animada.

—¿Y también de buen humor?

—Sí, diría que sí. Pero será mejor que no lo estropees. Y bien, ¿qué es lo que te ocurre? Veo que hay algo que te preocupa.

—¿Qué te ha parecido Effi? ¿Qué te ha parecido todo en general? Estaba muy extraña, a veces como muy infantil, y luego, de pronto, muy segura de sí misma y poco comedida ante un hombre como su marido. La única explicación que le encuentro es que aún no es consciente de cuáles son sus obligaciones, no sabe cómo es realmente Innstetten. ¿O es que acaso no le ama? Eso sería muy malo, porque, pese a todas sus buenas cualidades, no le veo un hombre capaz de ganarse fácilmente su amor.

La señora Von Briest guardaba silencio mientras seguía contando puntadas en el cañamazo. Finalmente dijo:

—Lo que acabas de decir, Briest, es lo más sensato que te he oído desde hace tres días, incluyendo tu discurso en el banquete. Yo también he estado dándole vueltas. Pero creo que no tenemos por qué preocuparnos.

—¿Acaso te abrió su corazón?

—Yo no diría tanto. Puede que Effi sienta la necesidad de hablar, pero no la de manifestar todo lo que encierra su corazón, y muchas cosas se las guarda para sí misma; es comunicativa y a la vez reservada, casi hermética. Una mezcla muy extraña…

—Estoy totalmente de acuerdo contigo. Pero, si no te ha dicho nada, ¿cómo sabes todo eso?

—Tan sólo he dicho que no me ha abierto su corazón. Ella nunca haría algo así como una confesión general, nunca vaciaría todo lo que alberga su alma. Fue algo que le surgió de súbito, como en un arranque, y enseguida volvió a encerrarse en sí misma. Pero precisamente porque fue algo casi involuntario, que le salió desde el fondo de su alma, es por lo que me parece importante.

—¿Y cuándo fue? ¿En qué ocasión?

—Debe de hacer unas tres semanas; estábamos sentadas en el jardín, ocupadas con las cosas del ajuar, cuando Wilke trajo una carta de Innstetten. Ella se la guardó en un bolsillo, y un cuarto de hora más tarde tuve que recordarle que la había recibido. Entonces la leyó, pero con un gesto de lo más impasible. Debo decir que me dio un vuelco el corazón, me asusté tanto que quise tener algún tipo de certidumbre, en la medida en que puede tenerse en este tipo de cosas.

—Cierto, muy cierto.

—¿Qué quieres decir?

—Bien, sólo digo que… Pero da igual. Sigue hablando, soy todo oídos.

—Pues le pregunté sin ambages qué le pasaba, y, dado su carácter, procurando evitar un tono solemne para que la cosa no pareciera demasiado seria, también le pregunté medio en broma si hubiera preferido casarse con el primo Briest, quien no había parado de cortejarla en Berlín…

—¿Y…?

—¡Tenías que haberla visto! Su reacción casi inmediata fue lanzar una risotada desdeñosa. Dijo que el primo no era más que un cadete mayorcito, pero con uniforme de teniente. Y que ella era incapaz de amar a un cadete, y mucho menos casarse con él. Y a continuación empezó a hablar de Innstetten, quien de pronto le pareció todo un dechado de virtudes masculinas.

—¿Y cómo te explicas tú eso?

—Muy sencillo. Aunque es tan despierta y temperamental, casi apasionada, o tal vez precisamente por eso, no es de esa clase de muchachas para las que el amor es lo más importante, o al menos no el sentimiento que de verdad responde a ese nombre. Sí que habla de ello, incluso con insistencia y cierto tono de convicción, pero sólo porque habrá leído en alguna parte que el amor es lo más alto, lo más hermoso, lo más sublime. Quizá se lo haya oído decir a Hulda, que es tan sentimental, y ella simplemente lo repite. Pero sin sentirlo de veras. Puede que algún día, Dios no lo quiera, llegue a experimentar ese sentimiento, pero de momento no creo que sea así.

—¿Qué es lo que tiene, entonces? ¿Qué le pasa?

—A mi entender, y según ella misma ha confesado, lo que anhela son dos cosas: diversiones y ambición.

—Bueno, eso es normal. Me tranquiliza.

—A mí no. Innstetten es un hombre que busca hacer carrera. No quiero decir que sea un arribista, porque no lo es, ya que es demasiado honrado para eso, sino que busca simplemente hacer carrera. Y eso colmará la ambición de Effi.

—¡Pues ahí lo tienes! ¿No es eso algo bueno?

—Sí, es bueno, pero sólo es una parte. Su ambición quedará satisfecha, pero ¿y sus ansias de distracción y aventuras? Ahí tengo mis dudas. Me temo que Innstetten no sea una persona capaz de ofrecerle las pequeñas diversiones, las distracciones ocasionales que sirven para combatir el hastío, ese enemigo mortal de toda jovencita con inquietudes. No es que vaya a dejarla abandonada en un desierto espiritual, es un hombre demasiado inteligente y mundano para ello, pero tampoco sabrá distraerla. Y lo que es aún peor, ni siquiera se planteará la cuestión de que deba hacerlo. Durante un tiempo las cosas seguirán su curso sin grandes contratiempos, pero llegará un momento en que ella se dé cuenta y se sienta ofendida. Y entonces no sé qué pasará. Porque aunque es muy delicada y dócil, también tiene un temperamento que puede echarlo todo a perder.

En ese instante entró Wilke procedente de la sala y anunció que había hecho recuento de la vajilla y que no faltaba ninguna pieza, a excepción de una de las copas de cristal fino, que se había roto el día anterior: durante el brindis, la señorita Hulda había entrechocado su copa con demasiado ímpetu con la del teniente Nienkerken.

—Es muy normal. Siempre anda en las nubes, y está claro que bajo las ramas del saúco tampoco ha mejorado mucho. Es una sosaina, y no entiendo a Nienkerken.

—Yo le entiendo perfectamente.

—¡Pero si no puede casarse con ella!

—No.

—¿Y entonces?

—Explicar eso, Luise, sería el cuento de nunca acabar.

Esta conversación tuvo lugar al día siguiente de la boda. Tres días más tarde llegó una pequeña tarjeta garabateada procedente de Munich, con los nombres de ambos abreviados con sólo dos letras.

Querida mamá:

Esta mañana hemos visitado la pinacoteca. Geert aún quería que fuésemos a otra galería, cuyo nombre no cito porque no sé escribirlo correctamente y no quiero preguntárselo. Es un ángel conmigo, y me lo explica todo. Todo es muy hermoso, pero también muy cansado. Confío en que en Italia todo será más tranquilo y mejor. Nos hospedamos en el Cuatro Estaciones, lo cual le ha dado a Geert la oportunidad de decirme que «fuera es otoño, pero contigo tengo la primavera». Me pareció muy ingenioso, pero sobre todo es muy atento conmigo. Por supuesto, yo también debo serlo, sobre todo cuando me dice o me explica algo. Además, lo conoce todo tan bien que ni siquiera necesita consultarlo. Habla de vosotros con mucho afecto, especialmente de mamá. A Hulda la encuentra un poco afectada, pero el viejo Niemeyer le ha parecido muy simpático. Muchos recuerdos de vuestra hija (emocionada, pero también algo cansada)

EFFI

Tarjetas parecidas iban llegando a diario desde Innsbruck, Verona, Vicenza, Padua, y todas comenzaban diciendo: «Esta mañana hemos visitado el famoso museo de la ciudad», o, cuando no era el museo, era un anfiteatro o alguna iglesia de Santa María más un nombre añadido. Desde Padua llegó, junto con la tarjeta, una carta de verdad:

> Ayer estuvimos en Vicenza. Vicenza debe verse sobre todo por Palladio; Geert me dijo que en su obra están las raíces de todo lo moderno. Naturalmente, en lo que a arquitectura se refiere. Aquí en Padua, adonde hemos llegado esta mañana, ha murmurado varias veces para sí, durante el camino al hotel, «Yace enterrado en Padua», y se sorprendió mucho de que yo nunca hubiera oído esas palabras. Pero al final me ha dicho que en realidad estaba bien así y que era mejor que no supiese nada de eso. Él es siempre muy justo, y ante todo se porta como un ángel conmigo, no es para nada un viejo pedante. Todavía me duelen los pies, y me canso de estar tanto rato de pie plantada contemplando los cuadros. Pero así es como debe ser. Me hace mucha ilusión ir a Venecia. Allí estaremos cinco días, o tal vez una semana entera. Geert me ha contado maravillas de las palomas de la plaza de San Marcos, y que allí se compran cucuruchos de semillas para dar de comer a esos preciosos animales. Al parecer esa escena aparece representada en muchos cuadros, con chicas rubias y muy guapas «del estilo de Hulda», según me ha dicho. Y esto ha hecho que me acuerde también de las chicas Jahnke. ¡Ah!, daría cualquier cosa por poder estar sentada sobre el eje del carro en nuestro patio, dando de comer a nuestras palomas. No matéis a aquella paloma del buche grande, quiero volver a verla. ¡Ah, qué hermoso es todo esto! Dicen que es el lugar más bello que existe. Vuestra dichosa, pero algo cansada.
>
> EFFI

Cuando acabó de leer la carta en voz alta, la señora Von Briest exclamó:

—¡Pobrecilla! Nos echa de menos.

—Sí, siente añoranza —dijo Briest—. Esa maldita manía de viajar…

—¿A qué viene eso ahora? Podrías haberlo impedido. Pero tú siempre lo ves todo muy claro a toro pasado. Cuando el niño ya se ha caído en el pozo, los regidores municipales mandan taparlo.

—Luise, por favor, no me vengas ahora con historias. Effi es nuestra hija, pero desde el tres de octubre es la baronesa Innstetten. Y si su marido, nuestro señor yerno, quiere hacer un viaje de novios y aprovechar la ocasión para volver a catalogar los cuadros de todas las galerías que visite, yo no puedo impedírselo. Eso es precisamente el matrimonio.

—Entonces estás reconociendo ahora lo que delante de mí siempre has negado: que la mujer está oprimida.

—Sí, Luise, te lo he negado. Pero ¿a qué viene sacar eso ahora? Sería el cuento de nunca acabar.

6

A mediados de noviembre —habían llegado hasta Capri y Sorrento—, expiraba el permiso de que disfrutaba Innstetten, y, fiel a su carácter y costumbres, lo dispuso todo para reintegrarse a su puesto con la más estricta puntualidad. El 14 por la mañana llegaron en el tren expreso a Berlín, donde en la estación les esperaba el primo Briest, quien, después de saludar a la pareja, les propuso que aprovechasen las dos horas que quedaban antes de la salida del próximo tren a Stettin para visitar el Panorama Sankt Privat y tomar a continuación un pequeño refrigerio. Aceptaron encantados. A mediodía se hallaban de nuevo en la estación, y tras la invitación de rigor, que afortunadamente nunca se toma muy en serio, de «tienes que venir a vernos», formulada tanto por Effi como por Innstetten, se despidieron en medio de cordiales apretones de manos. Al arrancar el tren, Effi saludó una vez más desde el compartimiento. Después se instaló cómodamente en su asiento y cerró los ojos. Sólo de vez en cuando se incorporaba un poco y alargaba las manos hacia su marido.

Fue un viaje agradable, y el tren llegó puntualmente a la estación de Klein-Tantow, desde la cual partía una carretera bordeada de árboles que conducía a Kessin, a unas dos millas de distancia. En verano, durante la época oficial de baños, aquel trayecto solía realizarse por vía fluvial, a bordo de un viejo vapor de ruedas que bajaba por el río Kessine, al cual la ciudad debía su nombre. Pero el *Fénix*, del que desde hacía mucho tiempo se pensaba que lo mejor que le podía pasar era que, cuando no llevase pasajeros, hiciese honor a su nombre y se redujera a cenizas, dejaba de funcionar cada primero de octubre, razón por la cual Innstetten había telegrafiado a su cochero Kruse desde Stettin: «A las cinco estación Klein-Tantow. Si buen tiempo, coche abierto».

Y como hacía buen tiempo, Kruse se hallaba en la estación con un carruaje descubierto. Saludó a los recién llegados con el ceremonial que cabría esperar de un cochero de casa grande.

—¿Y bien, Kruse? ¿Está todo dispuesto?

—Sí, señor. Todo dispuesto, señor.

—Pues ya puedes subir, Effi, cuando gustes.

Y mientras Effi se instalaba y un mozo colocaba una pequeña maleta de mano en el pescante, al lado del cochero, Innstetten dio las últimas instrucciones para que el resto del equipaje fuese enviado luego con el ómnibus. Acto seguido subió al carruaje, y tras pedir fuego en un alarde de campechana sencillez a uno de los transeúntes que pasaba por allí, ordenó al cochero:

—¡En marcha, Kruse!

Atravesaron el entramado de vías del paso a nivel, bajaron el talud en diagonal y pasaron por delante de una posada situada ya a pie de carretera que llevaba el nombre de Príncipe Bismarck. En este punto se bifurcaba el camino: a la derecha hacia Kessin, y a la izquierda hacia Varzin. De pie delante de la fonda había un hombre de mediana estatura y anchos hombros, vestido con un abrigo y un gorro de pieles. Al pasar el coche del señor gobernador, se descubrió con un ademán muy digno.

—¿Quién era? —preguntó Effi, sumamente interesada por todo lo que veía y, a causa de ello, de excelente humor—. Parece un *starost*, aunque debo confesar que nunca he visto a ninguno.

—Nadie lo diría, Effi, ya que te has acercado bastante. Parece realmente un *starost*, un notable polaco, y en cierto modo lo es. Es medio polaco, se llama Golchowski, y cuando se celebran elecciones o alguna cacería es cuando más se crece. Es en realidad un personaje bastante turbio, del cual no me fío en absoluto, y que seguramente tiene mucho que cargar sobre su conciencia. Pero presume de una gran lealtad, y cuando los señores de Varzin pasan por aquí poco le falta para arrodillarse ante su coche. Sé que al príncipe también le repugna. Pero ¿qué le vamos a hacer? No podemos romper con él, porque lo necesitamos. Tiene a toda la región metida en el bolsillo y entiende de asuntos electorales más que nadie. Pasa además por rico, y es un prestamista usurero, lo cual es algo bastante inusual entre los polacos, más bien todo lo contrario.

—Pues parecía tener buena planta.

—¡Ah, eso sí! Casi todos los hombres de por aquí tienen muy buena planta. Son una raza muy apuesta. Pero eso es lo mejor que se puede decir de ellos. Vuestras gentes de la Marca son más anodinas y taciturnas, y menos respetuosas en su trato, por no decir nada. Pero para ellas un sí es un sí y un no es un no, y te puedes fiar de ellas. Aquí no hay nada seguro.

—¿Por qué me dices todo esto? A fin de cuentas, ahora tengo que convivir con esta gente.

—Tú no, tú prácticamente no tendrás que verles ni hablarles, ya que aquí la ciudad y el campo son muy diferentes. Tú sólo conocerás a nuestros conciudadanos, a la buena gente de Kessin.

—¿A la buena gente de Kessin? ¿Lo dices con sarcasmo o es que son buenos de verdad?

—No me atrevo a afirmar que sean realmente buenos, pero sí que son muy diferentes de los otros. No se parecen en nada a la población campesina de la región.

—¿Y a qué se debe?

—A que son muy diferentes tanto por su procedencia como por sus actividades y relaciones. Los que viven en el interior, en el campo, son los llamados casubios, de los cuales seguramente habrás oído hablar. Son eslavos que se asentaron en la región hace ya unos mil años, o incluso mucho antes. Pero los que viven en el litoral y en las pequeñas ciudades costeras y comerciales son inmigrantes llegados de muy lejos, y que se preocupan muy poco por los casubios del interior, a los que les unen muy escasos vínculos. Están más interesados por los países con los que se relacionan comercialmente, y puesto que comercian con todo el mundo entre ellos encontrarás gentes venidas de todos los rincones del globo. Lo cual ocurre también en nuestro buen Kessin, a pesar de no ser más que un pequeño pueblecito perdido.

—¡Pero eso es maravilloso, Geert! Siempre estás hablando de un pueblecito perdido, y ahora resulta que, si no exageras, es un mundo completamente nuevo, con toda clase de exotismos. ¿No es eso lo que quieres decir?

Él asintió con la cabeza.

—Un mundo completamente nuevo, quizá con un negro o un turco, o tal vez hasta con un chino.

—Un chino también. ¿Cómo lo has adivinado? No sé si aún queda alguno más, pero en todo caso ya tuvimos uno, que ahora está muerto y enterrado en una parcela rodeada con una reja, junto al cementerio. Si no eres miedosa, algún día te enseñaré la tumba. Se encuentra en medio de las dunas, donde sólo crece el barrón y alguna que otra siempreviva, y donde se oye constantemente el ruido de las olas. Es un lugar muy hermoso y sobrecogedor.

—Sí, sobrecogedor, y me gustaría saber más cosas al respecto… Pero, bien pensado, mejor no, porque luego soñaría y tendría visiones. Si duermo bien esta noche, como espero que así sea, más vale que no se me aparezca un chino al lado de la cama.

—Y no lo hará.

—¡No lo hará! ¿Ves? Eso ya suena muy extraño, como si en cierto modo fuera posible. Quieres hacer que Kessin me resulte interesante, pero ahí te has excedido un poco. ¿Y tenéis mucha gente extranjera y exótica en Kessin?

—Muchísima. Todos los habitantes de la ciudad son gente foránea, cuyos padres o abuelos siguen viviendo en lugares lejanos.

—Qué curioso… Por favor, cuéntame más cosas al respecto. Pero nada siniestro. Para mí, un chino tiene siempre algo de siniestro.

—Sí que lo tiene —repuso Geert riendo—. Pero el resto, a Dios gracias, es muy diferente. Gente muy agradable y educada, tal vez demasiado metidos en sus asuntos, obsesionados con los negocios y siempre con una letra de cambio de dudoso valor en la mano. Sí, hay que ir con cuidado. Pero, por lo demás, son muy amables. Y para que veas que no exagero, voy a hacerte una pequeña lista de personajes representativos.

—Oh, sí, Geert, hazlo.

—Bueno, a menos de cincuenta pasos de casa, con su jardín tocando al nuestro, tenemos al maquinista y técnico en dragados Macpherson, escocés, un auténtico highlander.

—¿Y va vestido como tal?

—No, gracias a Dios, no, porque es un hombrecillo más bien enjuto, del que ni su clan ni Walter Scott estarían especialmente orgullosos. Luego, en la misma casa en que vive Macpherson, tenemos también a un viejo cirujano llamado Beza, que en realidad es un simple barbero; es originario de Lisboa, donde también nació el famoso general De Meza. Meza, Beza… ya ves que tienen la misma procedencia. Siguiendo río arriba, en el baluarte, que es el muelle donde atracan los barcos, tenemos un joyero llamado Stedingk, que procede de una vieja familia sueca; de hecho, creo que hay algunos condes imperiales que también llevan

ese nombre. Y para terminar por el momento, está el viejo y buen doctor Hannemann, que naturalmente es danés; pero que ha vivido mucho tiempo en Islandia, e incluso ha escrito un libro sobre las últimas erupciones del Hekla o el Krabla.

—Pero eso es magnífico, Geert. Son como seis novelas que no te podrías ni acabar. Al principio parece todo tan pequeñoburgués, pero luego resulta de lo más extraordinario. Y supongo que, al ser un puerto de mar, aparte de simples barberos, cirujanos y gente por el estilo, debe de haber también capitanes, algún holandés errante o…

—Tienes mucha razón. Tenemos incluso un capitán, que fue corsario con las banderas negras.

—Nunca he oído hablar de ello. ¿Qué son las banderas negras?

—Son piratas del lejano Tonkín y los mares del Sur… Pero ahora que ha vuelto a vivir entre gente normal, ha recuperado las buenas maneras y es muy divertido.

—Aun así, me daría un poco de miedo.

—No tienes por qué tener miedo en ningún caso, ni siquiera cuando yo esté de viaje por la región o tenga que ir a tomar el té con el príncipe, porque, aparte de todo, por fortuna tenemos también a Rollo…

—¿Rollo?

—Sí, Rollo… lo cual tal vez, suponiendo que hayas oído citar ese nombre alguna vez en casa de los Niemeyer o los Jahnke, te haga pensar en el duque de Normandía. Bueno, pues el nuestro tiene algo de ello. Pero no es más que un terranova, un animal magnífico que me quiere mucho y también te querrá a ti, porque sabe calar a la gente. Mientras lo tengas a tu lado, puedes estar bien tranquila y segura de que nadie, ni vivo ni muerto, se te acercará. Pero mira la luna allá arriba. ¿No es algo realmente hermoso?

Effi, que estaba ensimismada escuchando cada palabra con una mezcla de temor y curiosidad, se incorporó para mirar hacia la derecha, por donde la luna acababa de salir de entre unas blancas nubes que se despejaban rápidamente. El imponente disco cobrizo se alzaba tras un macizo de abedules, proyectando su luz sobre una gran superficie de agua que tanto podría ser una amplia manga formada en aquel punto por el río Kessin como una gran ensenada en la que penetraban las aguas del mar.

Effi estaba obnubilada.

—Tienes razón, Geert, es precioso, pero al mismo tiempo tiene algo de inquietante. En Italia nunca tuve una sensación así, ni siquiera durante el trayecto de Mestre a Venecia. Y eso que allí había también agua, tierras pantanosas y resplandor de luna. Incluso llegué a pensar que el puente podría hundirse en cualquier momento, pero no resultaba tan espectral como esto. ¿A qué se debe, Geert? ¿Es por eso que llaman el efecto boreal?

Innstetten se echó a reír.

—Kessin está a menos de quince millas al norte de Hohen-Cremmen, y antes de ver el primer oso polar tendrás que esperarte un buen rato. Creo que aún estás algo nerviosa por el largo viaje, el panorama Sankt Privat y la historia del chino.

—¡Pero si no me la has contado!

—No, sólo la he mencionado. Pero hablar de un chino constituye de por sí toda una historia.

—Sí —rio ella.

—Y también has querido pasarla por alto enseguida. ¿Ves allí enfrente una pequeña casa con una luz? Es una herrería. Allí el camino hace una curva y, cuando la hayamos pasado, verás ya la torre de Kessin, mejor dicho, las dos torres…

—¿Tiene dos?

—Sí, Kessin progresa. Ahora también tiene una iglesia católica.

Media hora más tarde el coche se detenía ante la residencia del gobernador, situada en el otro extremo de la ciudad. Era un edificio sencillo y algo anticuado, construido al estilo de la región, cuya fachada daba a la calle principal, que conducía a los baños. Una de las alas miraba a un bosquecillo conocido como «la plantación», que se extendía entre la ciudad y las dunas. No obstante, este antiguo edificio de vigas de madera vista acogía sólo la residencia privada de Innstetten, y no la casa de la gobernación, que se hallaba prácticamente enfrente, al otro lado de la calle.

No hubo necesidad de que Kruse anunciase la llegada del carruaje con los tres consabidos trallazos al aire. Hacía largo rato que los moradores de la casa aguardaban desde puertas y ventanas la aparición del coche que había salido para traer a los señores, y antes de que estos se acercasen a la casa ya se hallaban todos reunidos en el amplio umbral de piedra que ocupaba toda la acera. Al frente de todos estaba Rollo, que no paró de dar vueltas alrededor del carruaje hasta que se hubo detenido. Innstetten se apresuró a dar

la mano a su joven esposa para que bajase, y después, tomándola del brazo y dirigiendo a todos un amable saludo, pasó con ella por delante de la servidumbre, que siguió a la joven pareja hasta el recibidor, lleno de magníficos armarios antiguos. La doncella, una guapa mujer de cierta edad, cuyas rollizas carnes le sentaban casi tan bien como la graciosa cofia bordada que llevaba sobre el rubio cabello, ayudó a la señora a deshacerse del manguito y del abrigo, y ya se estaba agachando para quitarle las botas de caucho forradas de piel cuando Innstetten la interrumpió diciendo:

—Lo mejor será que te presente ahora al servicio de la casa, ya que están todos aquí con excepción de la señora Kruse, a quien no le gusta mucho dejarse ver. Sospecho que debe de estar como siempre con su inseparable gallina negra. —Todos sonrieron—. Pero dejemos en paz a la señora Kruse… Este es mi viejo Friedrich, que estaba ya conmigo en mi época de universitario… Qué buenos tiempos aquellos, ¿verdad, Friedrich? Y esta es Johanna, una compatriota tuya de la Marca, si es que consideras como tales a la gente de Pasewalk; y esta es Christel, a quien a diario confiamos nuestro bienestar corporal en almuerzos y cenas, y de quien puedo asegurarte que cocina como los ángeles. Y aquí tienes a Rollo. ¿Qué, Rollo, cómo estás?

Rollo parecía haber estado esperando aquellas palabras dirigidas a él, pues en cuanto oyó pronunciar su nombre lanzó un ladrido de alegría, se irguió y puso las patas sobre los hombros de su dueño.

—Está bien, Rollo, está bien. Mira, esta es la señora. Ya le he hablado de ti y le he dicho que eres un animal magnífico y que la protegerás.

Rollo bajó entonces las patas y se sentó delante de Innstetten, mirando al mismo tiempo con curiosidad a la joven señora. Y cuando esta le tendió la mano, el animal frotó contra ella su hocico.

Durante esta escena de presentaciones, Effi había tenido tiempo suficiente para echar un vistazo a su alrededor. Estaba como fascinada por todo lo que veía, deslumbrada por el gran derroche de iluminación. En la entrada del recibidor ardían unos cuatro o cinco apliques de latón de aspecto muy primitivo, cuya sencillez no hacía más que acrecentar el resplandor y la sensación de luz. Sobre una mesa plegable, colocada entre dos armarios de roble, había dos lámparas astrales con pantallas rojas, regalo de boda de Niemeyer, y delante de ellas estaba el servicio de té, con un pequeño fogón encendido bajo la tetera. Pero además de todo esto había otras muchas cosas más, algunas de ellas bastante peculiares. Tres vigas transversales dividían el techo del recibidor en partes iguales. De la primera colgaba un navío con las velas desplegadas, un puente de popa muy elevado y troneras por donde asomaban las bocas de los cañones, y más allá un gigantesco pez parecía nadar en el aire. Con el paraguas que todavía sostenía en las manos, Effi le dio un golpecito y el monstruo inició un ligero balanceo.

—¿Qué es esto, Geert? —preguntó.

—Es un tiburón.

—¿Y aquello del fondo que parece un enorme puro en la entrada de un estanco?

—Es un pequeño cocodrilo. Pero todo esto podrás contemplarlo mañana con más calma; ahora será mejor que tomemos una taza de té porque, a pesar de todas las capas y mantas de viaje que llevabas, debes de estar helada. Al final hacía un frío terrible.

Mientras las dos doncellas se retiraban, Innstetten ofreció el brazo a Effi y, seguidos por Friedrich y Rollo, pasaron a la sala-despacho del señor, situada a la izquierda. Effi se quedó tan sorprendida como cuando había entrado en el recibidor, pero, antes de que pudiera manifestar su asombro, Innstetten apartó una cortina por la que se accedía a una segunda estancia algo más grande, con vistas al patio y al jardín.

—Todo esto ahora es tuyo, Effi. Friedrich y Johanna, siguiendo mis instrucciones, lo han arreglado lo mejor que han podido. Creo que ha quedado bastante aceptable, y me alegraría de que también a ti te gustase.

Ella se soltó de su brazo y, poniéndose de puntillas, le dio un afectuoso beso.

—¡Ay, pobre de mí, cómo me mimas…! Este piano, y esta alfombra, que incluso diría que parece turca, y esa pecera con sus pececitos, y ese centro de flores… ¿No crees que me estás mimando demasiado?

—Sí, querida Effi, eso y más te mereces, por ser tan joven, linda y encantadora, cualidades de las que la gente de Kessin ya debe de estar enterada, porque, al menos en lo que respecta al centro de flores, yo no he tenido nada que ver. Friedrich, ¿de dónde ha salido ese centro?

—Del boticario Gieshübler… Hay una tarjeta.

—Ah, Gieshübler, Alonzo Gieshübler —dijo Innstetten riendo muy divertido mientras entregaba a Effi la tarjeta con aquel nombre de pila tan exótico—. Gieshübler, se me había olvidado hablarte de él… También tiene el título de doctor, dicho sea de paso, pero no le gusta que se dirijan a él así: dice que eso irrita a los auténticos doctores, y creo que tiene razón. Supongo que pronto le conocerás. Es todo un personaje, nuestro mejor elemento, un hombre culto, esteta y muy original, y sobre todo una persona llena de humanidad, que es lo más importante. Pero dejemos todo eso y sentémonos a tomar el té. ¿Dónde quieres tomarlo? ¿Aquí en

tu sala o en la mía? No hay más opciones. Pequeña y estrecha es mi cabaña…

Effi no se lo pensó dos veces y se sentó en un pequeño sofá esquinero.

—Hoy nos quedaremos aquí, serás mi invitado. O, mejor todavía, propongo que tomemos el té siempre en esta sala y el desayuno en la tuya. Así a cada uno nos tocará ser anfitriones, y ya siento curiosidad por saber dónde me gustará más.

—Depende de si prefieres la mañana o la noche.

—Claro. Pero también depende de cómo vayan las cosas o, mejor dicho, de cómo hagamos nosotros que vayan.

Y se echó a reír, se estrechó contra él e hizo ademán de besarle la mano.

—No, Effi, por Dios, eso sí que no. No me gusta el papel de persona venerable, eso déjalo para la gente de Kessin. Para ti soy…

—¿Qué eres para mí?

—Dejémoslo estar. Me guardaré muy bien de decirlo.

7

Ya era muy de día cuando Effi se despertó a la mañana siguiente. Le costó mucho situarse. ¿Dónde estaba? ¡Ah, sí!, en Kessin, en la casa del gobernador Von Innstetten, y ella era su esposa, la señora baronesa Innstetten. Se incorporó y miró a su alrededor con curiosidad. La noche anterior se había sentido demasiado cansada para examinar con detenimiento todas aquellas cosas un tanto extrañas y anticuadas que la rodeaban. Dos columnas sostenían el entramado de vigas del techo y unos cortinajes verdes separaban la alcoba con las dos camas del resto de la habitación; tan sólo en la parte central faltaba, o estaba corrido, un trozo de cortina, lo que le permitía observar el dormitorio desde el mismo lecho. Más allá, entre dos ventanas, estaba la cómoda con un estrecho espejo muy alto que llegaba hasta el techo, y justo a la derecha, en la pared que daba al pasillo, se alzaba una enorme estufa cubierta de azulejos negros, que, según la vieja costumbre (y como había observado la noche anterior), se alimentaba desde fuera. Ahora percibía cómo le llegaba el calor que irradiaba. Después de todo, ¡qué bien se estaba en la propia casa! Esa sensación de bienestar no la había experimentado en ningún momento del viaje, ni siquiera en Sorrento.

Pero ¿dónde estaba Innstetten? Reinaba un silencio absoluto, no se oía un alma. Tan sólo el tictac del péndulo de un pequeño reloj de pared, y de vez en cuando un ruido sordo en la estufa, de lo cual dedujo que alguien estaba echando algunos leños desde el pasillo. Al cabo de un rato recordó que la noche anterior Geert le había hablado de un timbre eléctrico que Effi encontró sin demasiado esfuerzo: junto a su almohada había un pequeño botón blanco de marfil que apretó suavemente.

Al momento apareció Johanna.

—¿Ha llamado la señora?

—Ah, Johanna, creo que he dormido demasiado. Debe de ser ya tarde.

—Acaban de dar las nueve.

—Y el señor… —no le salía decir simplemente «mi marido»—… el señor debe de haberse levantado sin hacer ningún ruido; yo no he oído nada.

—Así habrá sido. Y la señora seguro que dormía muy profundamente. Después de un viaje tan largo…

—Sí, claro. ¿Y el señor se levanta siempre tan temprano?

—Siempre, señora. En eso es muy estricto. No aguanta quedarse en la cama, y cuando entra en su despacho la estufa debe estar ya caliente y el café no tiene que hacerse esperar.

—Entonces, ¿ya ha desayunado?

—Oh, no, señora… El señor…

Effi intuyó que no debía haber hecho la pregunta y que hubiera sido preferible no expresar la sospecha de que Innstetten pudiera no haberla esperado. Se propuso arreglar esta pequeña falta y, después de levantarse y sentarse ante el tocador, reanudó la conversación diciendo:

—El señor hace muy bien. Madrugar era también la norma en casa de mis padres. Cuando la gente se levanta tarde, no se puede llevar ningún orden durante el día. El señor no me tendrá en cuenta lo de hoy, ya que he estado mucho rato sin poder dormir y hasta he sentido un poco de miedo.

—¿Qué me dice la señora? ¿Qué ha ocurrido?

—Oía un ruido muy extraño justo encima de mí, no muy fuerte pero muy penetrante. Sonaba como el arrastrar de largos vestidos por el entarimado, y luego, como estaba tan nerviosa, incluso me pareció ver varias veces unos zapatitos de raso blanco. Era como si estuviesen bailando arriba, pero muy suavemente.

Mientras Effi hablaba, Johanna miraba por encima del hombro el rostro de la joven dama en el alargado espejo, para observar mejor sus reacciones. Luego dijo:

—Sí, es en la sala de arriba. Antes lo oíamos también en la cocina. Pero ahora hemos dejado de oírlo; ya nos hemos acostumbrado.

—¿Es que hay algo especial ahí arriba?

—¡Oh, no, Dios nos libre, para nada! Durante un tiempo no sabíamos exactamente de dónde provenía el ruido, y el señor pastor ponía una cara muy grave y circunspecta, pese a que el doctor Gieshübler no hacía más que reírse. Ahora ya sabemos que se trata de las cortinas. La sala es algo cerrada y húmeda, y para evitar el olor a rancio las ventanas se dejan siempre abiertas, salvo cuando hay tempestad. Arriba siempre hay fuertes corrientes de aire que hacen que las viejas cortinas blancas se muevan y arrastren por el suelo. El ruido se parece mucho al que hacen los trajes de seda o los zapatos de raso, como muy bien ha dicho la señora.

—Sin duda habrá sido eso. Pero lo que no entiendo es por qué no se retiran las cortinas, o por qué no se acortan. Es un sonido tan peculiar que le pone a una los nervios de punta. Y ahora, Johanna, tenga la bondad de traer una pequeña toalla y enjugarme un poco la frente. O, mejor, tráigame el frasco de loción que hay en mi bolso de viaje… Ah, sí, ¡qué refrescante! Ahora iré al despacho. ¿Está el señor todavía o ya ha salido?

—El señor salió antes, creo que fue a la oficina de gobernación. Pero regresó hace ya un cuarto de hora. Le diré a Friedrich que traiga el desayuno.

Y Johanna abandonó la habitación, mientras Effi se echaba un último vistazo en el espejo antes de salir al pasillo, que a la luz del día perdía mucho del encanto de la víspera, y entrar en la sala de Geert.

Este se hallaba sentado ante su mesa de trabajo, un escritorio de persiana de aspecto algo robusto y pesado, pero del cual no había querido deshacerse porque era una herencia de casa de sus padres. Effi se colocó a su espalda, y le abrazó y dio un beso antes de que pudiera incorporarse.

—¿Ya?

—Ya, dices… Naturalmente para tomarme el pelo. Innstetten negó con la cabeza.

—¿Cómo podría hacer algo así?

Pero Effi se complacía en acusarse y se negó a admitir que su marido hubiera dicho su «¿Ya?» sin segundas intenciones.

—Ya debes saber por la experiencia del viaje que nunca me hago esperar por las mañanas. Durante el día puede ser, eso es otra cosa. Es verdad que no soy puntual, pero tampoco soy dormilona. En esto creo que mis padres me han educado bien.

—¿En esto? ¡En todo, mi encantadora Effi!

—Lo dices porque todavía estamos de luna de miel… Ah, no, ¡si ya ha acabado! Por Dios, Geert, no había pensado en eso; llevamos casados ya más de seis semanas, ¡seis semanas y un día! Ah, entonces la cosa cambia, ya no me lo tomo como un cumplido, sino como la verdad.

En aquel momento Friedrich entró con el café. La mesita en que se servía el desayuno estaba colocada en diagonal delante de un pequeño sofá en ángulo recto que ocupaba todo un rincón de la sala, y en el cual se sentaron ambos.

—Este café es excelente —dijo Effi mientras examinaba la habitación y el mobiliario—. Parece todavía un café de hotel, como el de Bottegone… ¿te acuerdas, en Florencia, con vistas a la catedral? Tengo que escribirle sobre esto a mamá, no tenemos un café como este en Hohen-Cremmen. Ahora es cuando empiezo a darme cuenta, Geert, de la buena boda que he hecho. En nuestra casa todo era simplemente aceptable.

—Tonterías, Effi. Nunca he visto una casa mejor dispuesta que la vuestra.

—¡Y cómo vives…! Cuando papá se compró un armario nuevo para las escopetas y puso encima de la mesa del despacho una cabeza de búfalo, y justo debajo un retrato del viejo Wrangel, de quien había sido ayudante, se pensó que había hecho una gran maravilla. Pero cuando miro todo lo que hay aquí, me doy cuenta de que nuestra magnificencia de Hohen-Cremmen es más bien insignificante y vulgar. No sé con qué comparar todo esto. Ya ayer por la tarde, mientras echaba un vistazo por encima, me dio por pensar en muchas cosas.

—¿Qué tipo de cosas, si se me permite preguntar?

—Ah, qué tipo de cosas… Te lo diré, pero no te rías. Una vez tuve un libro con estampas, en una de las cuales había un príncipe persa o indio, porque llevaba turbante, que estaba sentado con las piernas cruzadas sobre un cojín de seda roja, recostado contra un almohadón también de seda roja que sobresalía a los lados muy abultadamente, y la pared de detrás del príncipe indio estaba tapizada de puñales, espadas, pieles de leopardo, adargas y largas espingardas turcas. Y más o menos eso es lo que parece tu casa, y si tú te sentaras también con las piernas cruzadas, el parecido sería completo.

—Eres una criatura tan dulce y encantadora, Effi… No puedes ni imaginarte hasta qué punto te encuentro adorable, y cómo me gustaría demostrártelo a cada momento.

—No te preocupes, todavía nos queda mucho tiempo por delante. Tan sólo tengo diecisiete años y por ahora no tengo ninguna intención de morirme.

—En todo caso, no antes que yo. Claro que, si me muriese, preferiría llevarte conmigo. No quiero dejarte aquí para que seas de algún otro. ¿Qué me dices a eso?

—Tendría que pensármelo. Pero mejor será que lo dejemos. No me gusta hablar de la muerte, prefiero la vida. Y ahora dime, ¿cómo será la nuestra aquí? Hasta ahora me has hablado de toda clase de cosas curiosas acerca de la ciudad y el campo, pero sobre la vida que vamos a llevar aquí, ni una palabra. Ya veo que por aquí todo es bastante distinto de Hohen-Cremmen y Schwantikow, pero supongo que también en «esta buena Kessin», como tú dices, tendremos que hacer algún tipo de vida de sociedad. ¿Hay gentes de buena familia en la ciudad?

—No, mi querida Effi, por ese lado te esperan grandes decepciones. En los alrededores tenemos a unas cuantas familias nobles a las que tendrás ocasión de conocer, pero aquí en la ciudad no hay nada de eso.

—¿Nada absolutamente? No me lo puedo creer. Pero si sois más de tres mil habitantes, y entre tres mil personas, además de gentes modestas como el barbero Beza, si no recuerdo mal su nombre, también debe de haber una élite, algunas personalidades locales, ¿no?

Innstetten se echó a reír.

—Sí, personalidades sí que hay. Pero, bien mirado, no son gran cosa. Como es natural, tenemos un pastor, un juez, un director de escuela, un comandante de marina… En fin, de este tipo de cargos debe de haber como una docena, pero la mayoría son buenas gentes y malos músicos, compañías poco estimulantes. Los demás son sólo cónsules.

—¿Sólo cónsules? Por favor, Geert, ¿cómo puedes decir que son «sólo cónsules»? Es una posición muy prestigiosa e importante, casi diría que imponente. ¿Los cónsules no son los del hacha sobresaliendo entre un haz de ramas?

—No exactamente, Effi. Esos se llaman lictores.

—Tienes razón, esos son los lictores. Pero los cónsules eran también un cargo muy distinguido e ilustre. Bruto era cónsul, ¿no?

—Sí, Bruto era cónsul. Pero los nuestros no se le asemejan mucho, y se limitan a comerciar con azúcar o café, o a abrir una caja de naranjas y venderte después la pieza a diez céntimos.

—¡No puede ser! Estás exagerando.

—Pues así es. Son pequeños comerciantes avispados que, cuando llega algún barco extranjero y su tripulación no está muy al tanto de cómo funcionan los negocios en el país, les ayudan con sus conocimientos y consejos. Una vez que les han asesorado y prestado algún tipo de servicio a un barco, pongamos, portugués u holandés, entonces se convierten en representantes oficiales de dichos estados, así que en Kessin tenemos casi tantos embajadores y agregados como en Berlín. Cuando se celebra alguna festividad, y aquí tenemos muchas, se izan todas las banderas y, si el día es claro, verás ondear sobre nuestros tejados los colores de toda Europa, además de las barras y estrellas y el dragón chino.

—Estás de un humor muy burlón, Geert, e incluso puede que tengas razón. Pero, humildemente, debo confesarte que encuentro todo esto encantador, y que nuestras ciudades del Havel no son nada comparado con esto. Allá, cuando celebran el cumpleaños del emperador, tan sólo ondea la enseña negra y blanca, a veces con algo de rojo en el centro, pero eso no se puede comparar con todo ese mundo de banderas del que me hablas. En general, y como ya te he dicho, cada vez encuentro más que aquí todo tiene algo de exótico, y hasta ahora no he visto ni oído nada que no me haya admirado: como anoche, el curioso barco del pasillo, y luego el tiburón y el cocodrilo, y esta habitación tuya. Todo tan oriental y, te lo repito, como en el palacio de un príncipe indio…

—Como tú digas… Felicidades, princesa.

—Y luego está la sala de arriba, con sus largas cortinas que rozan el suelo…

—Pero ¿qué sabes tú de esa sala, Effi?

—Nada, tan sólo lo que acabo de decir. Durante una hora más o menos, cuando me desperté por la noche, me pareció oír como ruido de zapatos deslizándose por el suelo, como si alguien estuviera bailando, e incluso me pareció escuchar música. Pero todo muy suave y bajito. Y esta mañana se lo he contado a Johanna, sólo para disculparme por haberme despertado tan tarde. Entonces ella me ha explicado que el ruido procedía de unas cortinas muy largas que había en la sala de arriba. Creo que hemos de solucionar rápidamente esa cuestión acortando un poco las cortinas, o por lo menos cerrando las ventanas. De todos modos, pronto empezará la época de tormentas. Ya estamos a mediados de noviembre.

El rostro de Innstetten pareció reflejar cierto desconcierto, como si vacilara en si debía o no aclarar todo aquello. Al final, decidió no hacerlo.

—Tienes razón, Effi, acortaremos las cortinas. Pero no corre prisa, sobre todo porque no estamos seguros de que valga la pena. Puede que se trate de alguna otra cosa: el tiro de la chimenea, la carcoma, o una

garduña. Porque por aquí también tenemos garduñas, ¿sabes? De todas formas, y antes de hacer algún cambio, conviene que eches un vistazo a toda la casa, y, claro está, yo te haré de guía. No tardaremos más de un cuarto de hora. Luego te puedes arreglar, pero sólo un poco, porque así es como estás más encantadora, para recibir a nuestro amigo Gieshübler. Acaban de dar las diez y, o mucho me equivoco, o hacia las once o como mucho a las doce ya lo tendremos aquí para ponerse a tus pies y manifestarte sus respetos con la mayor de las devociones. Porque así es como suele expresarse. Pero aparte de eso, como ya te he dicho, es un hombre muy cabal que, si no os conozco mal a los dos, se convertirá pronto en amigo tuyo.

8

Hacía ya rato que habían dado las once y Gieshübler no había hecho aún acto de presencia.

—No puedo esperar más —dijo Geert, a quien reclamaban las ocupaciones de su cargo—. Si Gieshübler llegara a presentarse, muéstrate con él lo más amable que puedas y todo irá bien. No hagas que se incomode, porque si se siente cohibido no acierta a encontrar las palabras y dice las cosas más incoherentes. Pero si sabes ganarte su confianza y hacer que esté de buen humor, entonces habla como un libro abierto. Bueno, estoy seguro de que lo harás muy bien. No me esperes antes de las tres. Tengo un montón de asuntos que resolver. Lo de la sala de arriba ya lo pensaremos, pero de momento sería mejor dejarlo como está.

Y, dicho esto, Innstetten se marchó, dejando sola a su joven esposa. Effi se sentó recostándose un poco y mirando por la ventana desde un tranquilo rincón de la sala, con el brazo izquierdo apoyado en un pequeño saliente lateral del escritorio. La calle era la vía principal que conducía a la playa. En verano reinaba allí una gran animación, pero ahora, a mediados de noviembre, todo estaba solitario y tranquilo, y sólo un par de niños pobres, cuyos padres vivían en unas cabañas con techo de paja al otro lado de la plantación, hacían resonar sus zuecos en la acera al pasar por delante de la casa de los Innstetten. Pero Effi no experimentó ninguna sensación de soledad, pues su fantasía estaba todavía embargada por las cosas maravillosas que acababa de ver durante el recorrido por las habitaciones de la casa. La inspección había empezado por la cocina, que tenía unos fogones modernos y un cable eléctrico que corría por el techo hasta llegar al cuarto de las criadas. Ambas cosas eran de instalación reciente, y Effi se alegró mucho cuando Innstetten se lo hizo saber. Desde la cocina salieron nuevamente al pasillo, y de allí al patio, cuya primera mitad no era más que un estrecho callejón entre dos alas laterales que acogían todo lo relacionado con el gobierno y administración de la casa: a la derecha, un cuarto para las criadas, otro para los sirvientes y otro para los trastos; a la izquierda, entre la cuadra y la cochera, estaba la vivienda de la familia Kruse. Encima de esta había un pequeño cobertizo para las gallinas; y una tronera en el techo de la cuadra servía para que entraran y salieran las palomas. Effi lo había mirado todo con mucho interés, pero este se acrecentó sobremanera cuando, después de regresar del patio hasta la parte delantera de la casa, comenzaron a subir por una escalera que conducía a la planta superior. Era una escalera muy empinada, ruinosa y oscura; por el contrario, el rellano en el que desembocaba ofrecía un aspecto casi alegre, porque era muy luminoso y disfrutaba de una excelente vista: de un lado, más allá de los últimos tejados de la ciudad y de la plantación, se veía un molino de viento holandés que se alzaba entre las dunas; del otro lado se contemplaba el curso del Kessine, que aquí, justo antes de su desembocadura, presentaba una anchura imponente. Era una vista realmente impresionante, y Effi se mostró entusiasmada. «Sí, muy hermoso, muy pintoresco», había contestado Innstetten escuetamente, mientras abría la doble puerta que había a la derecha, cuyos batientes no ajustaban bien y que conducía a la ya famosa sala. Se extendía a todo lo largo de la planta; las ventanas de delante y de atrás estaban abiertas de par en par y las fuertes corrientes de aire agitaban de un lado a otro las largas cortinas varias veces mencionadas. En el centro de una de las paredes laterales sobresalía una chimenea con un gran hogar de piedra, mientras que en la de enfrente colgaban unos apliques de latón, cada uno con dos luces, exactamente iguales que los del recibidor. Pero allí todo parecía decrépito y abandonado. Effi se sintió un tanto defraudada, y no dudó en hacérselo saber a su marido, declarando que, en vez de aquella sala triste y desolada, prefería ver las habitaciones del otro lado del rellano. «En esa parte prácticamente no hay nada», había contestado Innstetten, quien no obstante fue abriendo todas las puertas, que conducían a cuatro habitaciones, cada una con una sola ventana y todas ellas enjalbegadas de amarillo, al igual que la sala, e igualmente vacías. Tan sólo en una de aquellas estancias había tres sillas de mimbre con los asientos desfondados, y pegada en el respaldo de una de ellas, una estampita de medio dedo de largo que representaba a un chino con casaca azul, bombachos amarillos y un sombrero plano en la cabeza. Effi la vio y preguntó:

—¿Qué significa ese chino?

El mismo Innstetten se mostró sorprendido al ver la estampa y aseguró no saber nada al respecto.

—Debe de haberla pegado Christel, o tal vez Johanna. Niñerías. Como puedes ver, está recortada de un libro de cuentos.

También Effi lo entendió así, y lo único que le extrañó es que Innstetten pareciera tan serio, como si aquello realmente tuviera importancia. Después la joven echó un nuevo vistazo a la sala y comentó que, bien pensado, era una lástima que todo estuviera tan vacío y abandonado.

—Abajo sólo tenemos tres habitaciones, y si alguien viene a pasar unos días no tendremos donde alojarlo. ¿No te parece que en esta sala podrían hacerse dos bonitos cuartos de huéspedes? Sería ideal para mamá, en el de atrás podría dormir mirando hacia el río y los dos espigones, y en el de delante tendría una magnífica vista de la ciudad y el molino de viento. En Hohen-Cremmen no tenemos más que uno de esos de tipo alemán, con sólo dos astas. Bueno, ¿qué me dices? Recuerda que el próximo mayo es muy posible que venga mamá.

Innstetten se había mostrado en todo de acuerdo, y sólo al final había dicho:

—Todo eso está muy bien. Pero creo que será mejor que alojemos a mamá en la casa de enfrente, en la de gobernación. Todo el primer piso está vacío, como este, y allí tendrá más independencia.

Este había sido más o menos el resultado de la primera visita de inspección a la casa. Luego Effi había ido a arreglarse, aunque sin darse tanta prisa como Innstetten había esperado, y ahora estaba sentada en el despacho de su marido, ensimismada en sus pensamientos que alternaban entre el chinito del piso de arriba y Gieshübler, que aún no había aparecido. Un cuarto de hora antes había pasado por la acera de enfrente, mirando disimuladamente hacia su ventana, un señor bajito, con un hombro más alto que el otro, casi contrahecho, que llevaba una elegante pelliza y un alto sombrero de copa muy bien cepillado. ¡Pero aquel no podía haber sido Gieshübler! No, aquel señor de hombros disparejos, con aquel aire tan distinguido, debía de ser el presidente de la audiencia. Effi recordó que había conocido a uno en una reunión en casa de la tía Therese, pero de pronto le vino a la memoria que en Kessin sólo había un juez de primera instancia.

Mientras se hallaba sumida en tales pensamientos, volvió a aparecer ante su vista el objeto de sus cavilaciones, quien sin duda venía de dar un paseo matinal por la plantación, tal vez para armarse de valor. Un minuto más tarde se presentó Friedrich para anunciar al boticario Gieshübler.

—Hazlo pasar.

A la joven dama le latía con fuerza el corazón: era la primera vez que recibía a alguien, no sólo como señora de la casa, sino también como primera dama de la ciudad.

Friedrich ayudó a Gieshübler a quitarse la pelliza, y acto seguido volvió a abrir la puerta.

Effi tendió una mano al azorado visitante, quien la besó con cierta torpeza impetuosa. Era evidente que, ya de entrada, la joven señora le había causado una gran impresión.

—Mi marido ya me ha dicho… Pero le estoy recibiendo en el despacho de mi marido… Él está en la oficina de gobernación y puede volver de un momento a otro… ¿Tendría la amabilidad de acompañarme a mi sala?

Gieshübler la siguió hasta la habitación contigua, donde Effi le indicó una de las butacas, mientras ella se sentaba en el sofá.

—No sé cómo expresarle la alegría que me dio ayer recibir sus flores y su tarjeta. Al instante dejé de sentirme como una forastera aquí, y cuando se lo comenté a Innstetten me contestó que usted y yo llegaríamos a ser buenos amigos.

—¿Eso dijo? ¡Qué amable por parte del gobernador! Sí, el señor consejero y usted, señora, son, si me permite decirlo, dos bellísimas personas que el destino ha tenido a bien juntar. Es algo que queda muy claro teniendo en cuenta el modo de ser de su señor esposo, y viendo ahora el modo de ser de usted, señora.

—Eso debe de ser porque me mira usted con muy buenos ojos. Soy muy joven. Y la juventud…

—¡Oh, señora, no diga usted nada en contra de la juventud! La juventud, aun con sus defectos, es hermosa y digna de estima, mientras que la vejez, aun con sus virtudes, no vale gran cosa. Cierto es que desde mi experiencia personal no puedo extenderme mucho sobre este tema; de la vejez, desde luego sí, pero no así sobre la juventud, porque en realidad nunca he sido joven. Las personas de mi idiosincrasia no son nunca jóvenes. Y debo confesarle que eso es lo más triste del caso. Carece uno de valor, no tiene confianza en sí mismo; apenas se atreve a sacar a bailar a una dama, para no ponerla en un compromiso, y así van pasando los años, se va haciendo uno viejo, y su vida ha sido al fin pobre y vacía.

Effi puso una mano sobre las de él.

—No diga usted eso. Las mujeres no somos tan malas.

—Oh, no, claro que no…

—Y cuando recuerdo todo lo que he vivido… que no es mucho, porque he salido poco y casi siempre he vivido en el campo… cuando recuerdo lo que he vivido, encuentro que siempre amamos aquello que es digno de ser amado. Y cuando ahora miro el presente, me doy cuenta de que usted es muy diferente de los demás, y para esto las mujeres tenemos una intuición especial. Tal vez en su caso haya contribuido mucho el nombre. Era una de las cosas que siempre decía Niemeyer, nuestro querido pastor: que el nombre, sobre todo el de pila, tiene una influencia misteriosa y determinante, y Alonzo Gieshübler, al menos a mi entender, te abre un mundo completamente nuevo. Me atrevería a decir incluso que Alonzo es un nombre romántico… como uno de los personajes de la *Preziosa* de Weber.

Gieshübler esbozó por primera vez una sonrisa de enorme satisfacción, e incluso encontró valor para dejar a un lado el sombrero de copa, demasiado alto para su estatura, que hasta entonces había hecho girar entre sus manos.

—Tiene usted toda la razón, señora.

—¡Ah, ahora lo entiendo…! Ya he oído hablar de los cónsules, al parecer tan numerosos en Kessin, y seguramente fue en casa del cónsul español donde su padre conoció a la hija de algún capitán de barco, imagino que una bella andaluza. Las andaluzas son todas muy hermosas.

—Es justo como usted lo ha dicho, señora. Y mi madre, en efecto, era una mujer muy hermosa, aunque yo no sea el más indicado para dar fe de ello. Pero cuando su esposo llegó aquí hace ya tres años, ella aún vivía, y conservaba todavía aquel fuego en los ojos. Él se lo podrá corroborar. Personalmente, yo he salido más a la parte de los Gieshübler, gente de escaso atractivo pero de acomodada posición social. Mi familia lleva aquí ya cuatro generaciones, desde que mis antepasados se asentaron hace ya un siglo, y si hubiese una nobleza boticaria…

—Entonces podría usted aspirar con todo derecho a ella. Y yo, por mi parte, acepto dicha nobleza sin la menor reserva. A nosotros, los descendientes de rancias familias, nos resulta muy fácil porque, así al menos me lo han enseñado mis padres, aceptamos de buen grado cualquier disposición noble, venga de donde venga. Yo soy una Briest, y desciendo de aquel otro Briest que, en la víspera de la batalla de Fehrbellin, lideró el asalto contra Rathenow. Tal vez haya oído hablar de ello…

—¡Ah!, ya lo creo, señora, esa es precisamente mi especialidad.

—Así pues, soy una Briest. Y hay una cosa que mi padre me ha dicho por lo menos un centenar de veces: Effi, porque ese es mi nombre, Effi, ese es el verdadero quid de la cuestión, y cuando Froben intercambió su caballo para salvar la vida del príncipe, los Briest entraron a formar parte de la nobleza, y cuando Lutero dijo «Esta es mi postura», sin duda entró a formar parte de la nobleza. Y creo, señor Gieshübler, que Innstetten tenía muchísima razón cuando me aseguró que usted y yo seríamos muy buenos amigos.

En aquel mismo instante, Gieshübler habría querido de todo corazón declararle su amor y pedirle permiso para luchar y morir por ella como un nuevo Cid o cualquier otro Campeador. Pero como nada de eso era posible y su corazón no podía resistirlo más, se puso en pie, buscó su sombrero, que por suerte encontró enseguida, y después de besar repetidas veces la mano de Effi, se marchó precipitadamente sin decir palabra.

9

Así transcurrió para Effi su primer día en Kessin. Innstetten le concedió media semana más para que acabara de instalarse y pudiera escribir varias cartas a Hohen-Cremmen: a mamá, a Hulda y a las gemelas. Luego dieron comienzo las visitas por la ciudad, algunas de las cuales (llovía tanto que podía disculparse aquel hecho excepcional) hubieron de hacerse en un coche cerrado. Una vez finalizadas estas, llegó el turno de la nobleza campesina. Esta tarea llevó más tiempo, ya que las distancias eran más largas y sólo era posible hacer una visita por día. La primera fue a los Borcke en Rothemoor, y después pasaron por Morgnitz, Dabergotz y Kroschentin para hacer las respectivas visitas de rigor a los Ahlemann, los Jatzkow y los Grasenabb. Hubo aún unas pocas más, entre ellas la que le hicieron al viejo barón Von Güldenklee en Papenhagen. La impresión que se llevó Effi fue la misma en todas partes: personas mediocres, de una amabilidad más que dudosa, que mientras aparentaban hablar de Bismarck y de la princesa heredera en realidad no hacían sino examinar de arriba abajo el vestido de Effi, que unos encontraron demasiado pretencioso para una señora tan joven, y otros demasiado poco decente para una dama de su posición social. Se notaba en todos ellos la influencia del estilo berlinés: preocupación por la apariencia y lo superficial, y un notable desconcierto e inseguridad al hablar de las grandes cuestiones. En Rothemoor, en casa de los Borcke, y después entre las familias de Morgnitz y de Dabergotz, fue tachada de «racionalista», mientras que los Grasenabb de Kroschentin la declararon directamente «atea». Cierto es que la vieja señora Grasenabb, una alemana del sur nacida Stiefel von Stiefenstein, había hecho un tímido intento de salvar a Effi para, al menos, la causa del deísmo. Pero Sidonie von Grasenabb, una vieja solterona de cuarenta y tres años, la había interrumpido con brusquedad:

—Madre, te digo que es simplemente atea, ni más ni menos, y de ahí no hay quien me saque.

A lo cual la anciana, que temía a su hija, optó por no oponer el más mínimo reparo.

Toda esta gira había durado unas dos semanas. El 2 de diciembre, ya bien entrada la noche, regresaban a Kessin tras haber cumplido con la última visita, que había sido para los Güldenklee de Papenhagen. En esta ocasión, Innstetten tampoco pudo escapar a la fatalidad de tener que hablar de política con el viejo Güldenklee.

—¡Ah, mi querido gobernador, cómo cambian los tiempos…! Hace más o menos una generación, justamente un dos de diciembre como este, el buen Luis, sobrino de Napoleón, si es que realmente lo era y no descendía de algún otro, abría fuego contra la chusma parisiense. En fin, eso se le podría perdonar, era el hombre indicado para hacerlo y, como yo siempre digo, «todo el mundo recibe lo que se merece». Pero que después perdiera por completo el juicio y en el año setenta, como quien no quiere la cosa, decidiera meterse con nosotros, verá usted, querido barón, eso… ¿cómo lo diría…?, ¡eso fue una insolencia! Ahora bien, lo pagó bien caro. El de arriba no se anda con chiquitas, ese está de nuestra parte.

—Sí —repuso Innstetten, que era lo suficientemente inteligente para simular que se tomaba en serio tales sandeces—, el héroe y conquistador de Sarrebruck no supo lo que se hacía. Pero no debería ser tan severo con él personalmente. A fin de cuentas, ¿qué hombre manda en su propia casa? Ninguno. Empiezo a creer que Luis Napoleón no era más que un trozo de cera en manos de su mujer católica o, mejor dicho, su mujer jesuítica.

—Cera en manos de su mujer, que luego le dejó con un palmo de narices. Pues sí, Innstetten, Luis Napoleón no era más que eso. Pero ¿no pretenderá defender ahora a aquel títere con ese argumento? Ya ha sido juzgado y condenado. Además, ni siquiera se ha demostrado —y al decir esto buscó con la mirada, algo atemorizado, los ojos de su media costilla— que el dominio de las mujeres no constituya en realidad una ventaja; claro que, en este caso, la mujer debe valer para ello. Pero ¿quién era su mujer? Ni siquiera era una mujer; en el mejor de los casos, una dama, y eso lo dice todo. «Dama» siempre tiene cierto regusto… Esa Eugenia, y no mencionaré sus relaciones con el banquero judío, porque detesto la arrogancia de la virtud, tenía un algo de café cantante, y si la ciudad en que vivía era Babel, ella era la cortesana de Babel. No

quiero expresarme con más claridad, pues soy muy consciente —y se inclinó hacia Effi— de cuáles son mis obligaciones hacia las mujeres alemanas. Disculpe, señora mía, si la he escandalizado hablando de estas cuestiones.

Así había discurrido la conversación, después de haber hablado también de las elecciones, de Nobiling y de la cosecha de colza, y ahora Innstetten y Effi volvían a estar cómodamente instalados en su casa, donde todavía charlaron su buena media hora. Las dos doncellas de la casa ya se habían acostado, porque era casi medianoche.

Innstetten, con un batín corto y zapatillas de tafilete, andaba de un lado a otro por la habitación. Effi todavía llevaba el vestido, y había dejado a un lado su abanico y sus guantes.

—Bien —dijo Innstetten, interrumpiendo sus idas y venidas—, deberíamos celebrar este magno día, y la verdad es que no sé cómo. ¿Quieres que te toque una marcha triunfal, o que ponga a balancearse el tiburón de ahí fuera y te lleve en brazos por el recibidor? Algo hay que hacer… ¿no te das cuenta de que hoy hemos puesto fin a todas las visitas?

—Gracias a Dios que han terminado —dijo Effi—. Pero la sensación de poder estar tranquilos a partir de ahora es ya de por sí fiesta suficiente. Para completarla, podrías darme aunque sólo fuera un beso. Pero esas cosas no se te ocurren. Te has pasado todo el camino sin dedicarme ni un gesto ni una palabra dulce, frío como un muñeco de nieve. Y, eso sí, fumando un puro tras otro.

—Oh, tranquila, ya me iré corrigiendo. Pero ahora me gustaría saber tu opinión acerca de todo este asunto de la vida social. ¿Hay alguien que te haya resultado especialmente simpático? ¿Quiénes se llevan la palma, los Borcke o los Grasenabb? ¿O prefieres acaso al viejo Güldenklee? Lo que ha dicho de Eugenia era algo francamente noble y puro, ¿no crees?

—¡Ah, mira por dónde, también *herr* Von Innstetten sabe ser sarcástico! ¡Hasta ahora no había conocido esa faceta de tu carácter!

—Si nuestra nobleza terrateniente no te ha convencido —prosiguió Innstetten sin inmutarse—, ¿qué me dices de nuestros notables de Kessin? ¿Qué impresión te has llevado de nuestro círculo social? Es nuestro último recurso, una cuestión de vida o muerte. El otro día te vi hablando con nuestro juez de primera instancia: es un teniente en la reserva, un hombrecillo pintoresco al que podrías tolerar, siempre que se quite de la cabeza esa idea de que gracias a su sola aparición en uno de los flancos del ejército pudo lograrse la reconquista de Le Bourget. ¡Y su señora esposa…! Pasa por ser la mejor jugadora de Boston del lugar, y también tiene las fichas más bonitas de la ciudad. Así pues, Effi, ¿cómo piensas que te irá por Kessin? ¿Crees que podrás adaptarte? ¿Te harás popular y me asegurarás la mayoría si me presento al Reichstag?

¿O bien te decidirás por la reclusión, por renunciar a todo contacto con las gentes de Kessin, tanto de la ciudad como del campo?

—Creo que me decidiré por la reclusión, a no ser que me saque de ella la botica del moro. Supongo que eso me hará bajar aún más enteros a ojos de Sidonie, pero tendré que correr el riesgo. Es una batalla que aún debo librar. Decididamente, me decanto por Gieshübler. Suena un tanto extraño, pero es la única persona de por aquí con la que realmente se puede hablar.

—Lo es —dijo Innstetten—. Sabes elegir muy bien, querida mía.

—Si no fuese así, ¿cómo te tendría a ti? —dijo Effi, colgándose del brazo de su esposo.

Esto ocurría el 2 de diciembre. Una semana después, Bismarck llegaba a Varzin, e Innstetten tenía muy claro que hasta Navidad, como mínimo, no podría contar con una sola jornada de tranquilidad. Desde los días de Versalles, el príncipe sentía una especial predilección por él, y casi siempre que tenía invitados hacía que se sentara a su mesa. Pero también solía invitarlo a él solo, ya que, debido a su brillante inteligencia y sus buenas maneras, el joven gobernador gozaba asimismo del favor de la princesa.

La primera invitación tuvo lugar el día 14. Había caído una fuerte nevada, por lo que Innstetten se dispuso a hacer en trineo el recorrido de casi dos horas hasta la estación, y después aún le quedaría una hora de trayecto en tren.

—No me esperes levantada, Effi. No creo que pueda volver antes de medianoche. Seguramente llegaré sobre las dos, o quizá más tarde. Pero no te molestaré. No te preocupes, nos veremos por la mañana.

Y tras decir esto se montó en el trineo, y las dos jacas de color isabelino cruzaron raudas la ciudad para después surcar los campos rumbo a la estación.

Aquella era su primera separación larga, de casi doce horas. ¡Pobre Effi! ¿Cómo pasaría la velada? Acostarse temprano era peligroso: se despertaría y luego no podría volver a dormirse, ya que estaría

pendiente de cualquier ruido. No, lo mejor era cansarse hasta quedar rendida, para luego poder disfrutar de un sueño profundo. Tras escribir una carta a su madre, fue a ver a la señora Kruse, cuya perturbación mental —solía acunar en su seno a la gallina negra hasta bien entrada la noche— le inspiraba una profunda compasión. Pero el amable gesto de Effi no encontró la menor respuesta por parte de la mujer, quien, sentada en su cuarto excesivamente caldeado, permaneció inmóvil y muda, sumida en sus oscuros pensamientos. Al percatarse Effi de que su visita era más una molestia que un alivio, optó por marcharse, no sin antes preguntar a la enferma si necesitaba algo. Pero esta rechazó todo ofrecimiento.

Entretanto se había hecho de noche, y ya habían encendido las luces. Effi se instaló junto a la ventana de su estancia y se dedicó a mirar hacia el bosquecillo, en cuyas ramas la nieve había dejado un centelleo plateado. Estaba tan completamente absorta en la contemplación del paisaje que ni siquiera se dio cuenta de lo que ocurría a sus espaldas. Cuando se volvió a mirar, observó que Friedrich, cuidadosamente y sin hacer ruido alguno, había colocado una bandeja sobre la mesilla del sofá. «Ah, sí, la cena… Será mejor que me siente». Pero no tenía apetito, así que volvió a levantarse y leyó una vez más la carta que había escrito a su madre. Si antes ya se sentía sola, ahora la sensación se hizo aún más intensa. ¡Qué no hubiera dado por ver aparecer por la puerta las dos cabecitas pelirrojas de las Jahnke, o incluso la de Hulda! Esta era sin duda excesivamente sentimental, y la mayoría de las veces no hablaba más que de sus triunfos, pero por dudosos y discutibles que estos fueran, en ese momento Effi los hubiera escuchado muy gustosa. Finalmente abrió el piano para tocar algo, pero no era lo más adecuado. «No, eso haría que me pusiera aún más melancólica; será mejor que lea». Y buscó un libro. El primero que cayó en sus manos fue un grueso volumen, una guía de viajes encuadernada con tapas rojas y ya bastante antigua, tal vez de la época en que Innstetten era aún teniente. «Sí, leeré esto; no hay nada que relaje más que este tipo de libros. Lo único que no me gusta de ellos son los mapas, pero ya me guardaré bien de no cansarme la vista con toda esa exasperante letra pequeña». Lo abrió al azar, por la página 153. Junto a ella oía el tictac del reloj, y afuera a Rollo, que desde que empezó a oscurecer había abandonado su sitio en la cochera y, como cada noche, se había tendido sobre la gran estera colocada ante la puerta de la alcoba. La conciencia de su proximidad aminoraba en ella el sentimiento de abandono. Sí, algo más animada, comenzó a leer sin demora. Precisamente la página por la que se había abierto el libro trataba del Eremitage, el célebre palacio de recreo del margrave en las inmediaciones de Bayreuth. Esto la sedujo —Bayreuth, Richard Wagner—, y comenzó a leer: «Entre los cuadros expuestos en el Eremitage, mencionaremos todavía otro digno de interés, no tanto por su belleza como por su antigüedad y por la persona en él representada. Se trata del retrato, bastante oscurecido por el tiempo, de una mujer de cabeza pequeña, de facciones duras y algo inquietantes, con una valona que parece sostenerle la testa por sí sola. Algunos creen que se trata de una antigua margravina de finales del siglo XV; según otros, se trata de la condesa de Orlamünde; pero todo el mundo coincide en afirmar que es el retrato de una dama que ha alcanzado en la historia de los Hohenzollern cierta celebridad bajo el nombre de “la dama blanca”».

«Pues sí que me he lucido —pensó Effi, dejando el libro a un lado—. Intento calmar mis nervios, y lo primero que me encuentro es la historia de la dama blanca, que me ha dado miedo desde que tengo uso de razón. Pero ahora que ya estoy un poco asustada, voy a leer hasta el final».

Abrió de nuevo el libro y siguió leyendo: «Este viejo retrato (cuyo *original* ha tenido un papel tan importante en la historia familiar de los Hohenzollern) también ha desempeñado un interesante papel como *cuadro* en la historia particular del palacio del Eremitage, debido probablemente al hecho de estar colgado sobre una puerta secreta, imperceptible para el visitante, tras la cual hay una escalera que conduce a los sótanos. Se cuenta que, cuando Napoleón pasó aquí la noche, la “dama blanca” salió del cuadro y se acercó a su cama. El emperador, despavorido, gritó llamando a su ayudante, y hay quien asegura que hasta el final de sus días siguió hablando con indignación de este *maudit château*».

«Debo desistir de intentar tranquilizarme mediante la lectura —dijo Effi para sí—. Si continúo leyendo, todavía iré a parar a alguna catacumba y me encontraré al diablo a lomos de algún tonel de vino. Creo que en Alemania hay muchas historias de estas, y en una guía de viaje es normal que aparezcan todas. Así que más vale que cierre los ojos e intente recordar lo mejor posible cómo fue la fiesta de víspera del casamiento: las gemelas, que no podían proseguir con la función a causa de las lágrimas, y el primo Briest, que, cuando todo el mundo se miraba inquieto e incomodado, afirmó con una sorprendente dignidad que lágrimas como aquellas le abrían a uno las puertas del paraíso. Estuvo verdaderamente encantador, sin perder en ningún momento su buen humor… ¿Y qué hago yo aquí? ¡Ah, yo no sirvo para ser una gran señora! Mamá sí que habría sabido estar en su sitio, como corresponde a la esposa de todo un gobernador, y Sidonie von Grasenabb no habría tenido más que palabras de alabanza para ella, sin preocuparse en absoluto por si creía o dejaba de creer. Pero yo… yo sigo siendo una niña y nunca dejaré de serlo. En cierta ocasión oí

decir que eso era algo bueno. Pero no sé qué pensar… Una debe saber adaptarse siempre a la posición que le ha tocado en la vida».

En ese momento entró Friedrich para retirar el servicio de la cena.

—¿Qué hora es, Friedrich?

—Cerca de las nueve, señora.

—Muy bien. Haga venir a Johanna.

—¿Llamaba la señora?

—Sí, Johanna, quiero acostarme. Ya sé que todavía es temprano, ¡pero estoy tan sola…! Por favor, vaya primero a echar esta carta; así, cuando regrese, ya será hora. Y aunque no lo sea, da igual.

Effi tomó la lámpara y se dirigió a su dormitorio. Rollo ya estaba allí, efectivamente, echado sobre su estera. Al ver llegar a Effi se irguió para dejarla pasar, y acercó el hocico a la mano de su ama. Luego volvió a echarse.

Mientras tanto, Johanna había ido a la casa de gobernación para echar la carta. No se dio demasiada prisa, sino que prefirió quedarse un buen rato charlando con la señora Paaschen, la mujer del ujier, y, como era de esperar, hablaron de la señora.

—¿Y cómo es? —preguntó la señora Paaschen.

—Oh, muy joven.

—Bueno, eso no es ningún inconveniente, más bien al contrario. Las jóvenes, y eso es precisamente lo bueno que tienen, no se ocupan más que de mirarse al espejo, para peinarse y arreglarse, y lo demás les trae sin cuidado. No son como esas otras que andan husmeando en la cocina para contar las habas o los cabos de vela, y no soportan que a una le den un beso tan sólo porque a ellas ya no se los dan.

—Sí —dijo Johanna—, así es como era el ama que tuve antes, y además sin ningún motivo. Pero de eso no tiene nada nuestra joven señora.

—Y él, ¿se muestra muy cariñoso?

—Oh, mucho. Ya se puede imaginar.

—Pero que la deje así, tan sola…

—Ya, señora Paaschen, pero no olvide que se trata del príncipe… y él, al fin y al cabo, es el gobernador. Y tal vez aspire a algo más.

—Pues claro que sí. Y lo conseguirá. El señor vale mucho. Mi marido siempre lo dice, y él conoce muy bien a la gente.

Aquel recado para cruzar al otro lado de la calle había durado como un cuarto de hora, y cuando Johanna regresó la señora ya estaba sentada ante el tocador, esperándola.

—Ha tardado mucho, Johanna.

—Sí, señora. Disculpe, señora. Me encontré con la mujer de Paaschen y me he entretenido un poco con ella. Aquí hay tanto silencio que una se alegra siempre de encontrarse a alguien con quien charlar un poco. Christel es muy buena persona, pero apenas habla, y Friedrich es tan insulso y tan prudente que no hay manera de sacarle palabra. Cierto que hay que saber callar, y la señora Paaschen, que es tan chismosa y ordinaria, tampoco me hace ninguna gracia. Pero a una le gusta de vez en cuando oír y ver cosas.

Effi suspiró.

—Sí, Johanna, tiene mucha razón…

—Qué cabello tan hermoso tiene la señora, tan largo y tan sedoso…

—Sí, es muy suave. Pero eso no es bueno, Johanna. Tal es el cabello, tal es el carácter.

—Muy cierto, señora. Pero un carácter suave es siempre mejor que uno fuerte. Yo también tengo el cabello suave.

—Sí, Johanna, y además muy rubio. Es el que más gusta a los hombres.

—Eso depende, señora. Algunos prefieren el cabello oscuro.

—Oh, sí —repuso Effi riendo—, yo también lo he notado. Debe de haber otras razones. Pero las rubias también tienen siempre el cutis muy blanco, como usted, Johanna, y apostaría a que no le faltan pretendientes. Soy muy joven todavía, pero entiendo de estas cosas. Además tengo una amiga que es también rubia, de un rubio muy claro, más claro todavía que el suyo, y que es hija de un pastor…

—Ah, ya…

—¿Qué quiere decir con ese «ah, ya…», Johanna? Suena un tanto mordaz y extraño, ¿no cree? Supongo que no tendrá nada en contra de las hijas de los pastores… Es una chica muy linda, y eso les parecía también a nuestros oficiales, porque allí teníamos oficiales, ¿sabe?, húsares de los de uniforme rojo. Y ella se viste con mucho gusto, con un corpiño de terciopelo negro y una flor, una rosa o un heliotropo. Si no hubiese tenido aquellos grandes ojos saltones… tendría que haberlos visto, Johanna, así de grandes… —y

Effi, riendo, se estiró del párpado derecho hacia abajo—, habría sido una auténtica belleza. Se llama Hulda, Hulda Niemeyer, y no es que fuésemos íntimas, pero si la tuviese ahora aquí, sentada en ese pequeño sofá, me quedaría charlando con ella hasta medianoche e incluso más tarde. Siento tanta añoranza… —Y al decir esto atrajo hacia sí la cabeza de Johanna—. Y tengo tanto miedo…

—No se preocupe, señora, ya verá como se le pasará. Todos lo hemos tenido…

—¿Qué quiere decir con eso de que todos lo han tenido, Johanna?

—… y si la señora tiene realmente tanto miedo, puedo hacerme aquí un lecho. Cojo la estera y pongo una silla boca abajo para tener una especie de almohada, y duermo aquí hasta por la mañana o hasta que regrese el señor.

—Me ha prometido que no entraría a molestarme.

—O bien puedo quedarme simplemente sentada en el sofá.

—Sí, eso quizá estaría bien. Pero no, tampoco. El señor no debe saber que tengo miedo, eso no le gustaría. Quiere que sea valiente y decidida como él. Pero eso no puede ser, siempre he sido un poco miedosa… Naturalmente, soy consciente de que debo dominarme y procurar complacerlo, en esto como en todo lo demás. Y además también tengo a Rollo, vigilando en el umbral del dormitorio.

A cada una de sus palabras, Johanna iba asintiendo con la cabeza, y luego encendió la luz que estaba encima de la mesilla de noche de Effi. Después cogió la lámpara.

—¿Desea algo más la señora?

—No, Johanna. ¿Están bien cerradas las contraventanas?

—Sólo ajustadas, señora. Si no, la habitación estaría demasiado oscura y poco aireada.

—Bueno, está bien.

Y Johanna se marchó. Effi se metió en la cama y se arrebujó bien entre las mantas.

Dejó la luz encendida porque tenía la intención de no dormirse enseguida, sino que se había propuesto rememorar, como había hecho antes con la fiesta de la boda, todo su viaje de novios. Por su mente empezaron a desfilar todos los recuerdos del viaje, pero entonces ocurrió algo que no había esperado: mientras llegaba a Verona y buscaba la casa de Julieta Capuleto, sus ojos se cerraron. En su palmatoria de plata, el pequeño cabo de vela se fue consumiendo poco a poco, flameó tembloroso y se apagó.

Effi durmió profundamente durante un buen rato. Pero de repente se despertó sobresaltada, gritando. Ella misma oyó su grito de pavor y también el ladrido de Rollo en la puerta, un «guau, guau» apagado y casi atemorizado que retumbó por todo el pasillo. Sintió como si el corazón se le paralizara, era incapaz de llamar pidiendo ayuda, y entonces notó cómo algo pasaba por su lado como una exhalación. De repente la puerta que daba al recibidor se abrió de golpe, y en ese preciso instante su terrible angustia se convirtió en una sensación de liberación, ya que en vez de enfrentarse a una visión horripilante, vio entrar a Rollo avanzando hacia ella, buscando con la cabeza la mano de su ama, y, una vez que la hubo encontrado, se tendió sobre la alfombra que había al pie de la cama. Pero, con la otra mano, Effi ya había apretado tres veces el botón del timbre, y en menos de medio minuto ya estaba allí Johanna, descalza, con la falda recogida sobre el brazo y con un gran pañuelo a cuadros sobre la cabeza y los hombros.

—¡Johanna, gracias a Dios que está aquí!

—¿Qué ha ocurrido, señora? ¿Ha tenido una pesadilla?

—Sí, debe de haber sido eso, una pesadilla. Pero también ha habido algo distinto…

—¿Qué cosa, señora?

—Estaba durmiendo muy profundamente y de repente me he despertado gritando… Quizá sí que ha sido una pesadilla… Mi familia es muy dada a las pesadillas; mi papá también las sufre y nos asusta, y mamá siempre le dice que debería controlarse, pero, claro, eso es muy fácil decirlo… En fin, me he despertado y he gritado, y cuando miré a mi alrededor, aunque en la oscuridad era difícil ver nada, noté cómo algo pasaba deslizándose rápidamente junto a la cama, justo ahí donde está usted, Johanna, y enseguida desapareció. Y cuando me pregunto de verdad lo que era…

—¿Qué era, señora?

—Cuando me lo pregunto bien… No me atrevo a decirlo, Johanna… pero creo que era el chino.

—¿El de arriba? —Y Johanna casi se echa a reír—. ¿El pequeño chino que Christel y yo pegamos en el respaldo de la silla? ¡Ah!, eso es que la señora lo ha soñado, y una vez despierta ha continuado viendo la imagen del sueño.

—Eso me gustaría creer, pero ha sido en el preciso instante en que Rollo ha ladrado, y eso significa que él también ha debido de ver algo; y entonces la puerta se ha abierto de golpe y el buen animal ha venido corriendo hacia mí, como para salvarme. ¡Ah, mi querida Johanna, ha sido espantoso! Y yo tan joven y tan sola… ¡Ay, si al menos tuviera a alguien aquí con quien poder llorar! Pero estoy tan lejos de mi casa… ¡Ay,

mi casa!

—El señor está a punto de llegar.

—¡No, que no venga! ¡Que no me vea así! Puede que se riese de mí, y eso sí que no podría soportarlo. Ha sido tan horrible, Johanna… Quédese conmigo, por favor… Pero no despierte a Christel ni a Friedrich. Que no se entere nadie.

—Si quiere también podría ir a buscar a la señora Kruse. Ella no duerme nunca, se pasa en vela toda la noche.

—No, no, también ella me infunde espanto. Con todo eso de la gallina negra, me entra no sé qué de verla. Que no venga. No, Johanna, quédese usted sola. Ha hecho muy bien en ajustar las contraventanas. Pero ahora ábralas del todo, haciendo mucho ruido, quiero oír ruidos humanos… Tengo que llamarlos así, aunque suene extraño… Y luego abra un poco la ventana, necesito que entre algo de aire y de luz.

Johanna hizo lo que se le ordenó, y Effi se recostó sobre las almohadas. Poco después estaba sumida en un sueño letárgico.

10

Innstetten no había regresado de Varzin hasta cerca de las seis de la madrugada y, evitando las ruidosas muestras de afecto de Rollo, se había retirado con el mayor silencio posible a su cuarto. Allí se acomodó como pudo y tan sólo consintió que Friedrich le tapara con una manta.

—Despiértame a las nueve.

Y a esa hora en punto Friedrich le despertó. Se levantó rápidamente y dijo:

—Tráeme el desayuno.

—La señora duerme todavía.

—¿Tan tarde? ¿Es que ha pasado algo?

—No lo sé; lo único que sé es que Johanna ha tenido que pasar la noche en la habitación de la señora.

—Llama entonces a Johanna.

Y esta se presentó. Tenía el mismo rostro sonrosado de siempre, como si lo ocurrido en el transcurso de la noche no la hubiese afectado.

—¿Qué le ha pasado a la señora? Friedrich me ha dicho que había sucedido algo y que ha dormido en su habitación.

—Sí, señor barón. La señora llamó al timbre tres veces seguidas, muy deprisa, y acudí enseguida pensando que había ocurrido algo. Y así era. Sin duda había estado soñando, pero puede que también fuese lo otro.

—¿Qué es lo otro?

—Ah, el señor lo sabe muy bien.

—Yo no sé nada. Pero, de todos modos, esto se tiene que acabar. ¿Y cómo encontró a la señora?

—Estaba fuera de sí y agarraba fuertemente por el collar a Rollo, que estaba a su lado junto a la cama. El animal parecía también espantado.

—¿Y qué había soñado o, si lo prefiere, qué había visto y oído? ¿Qué dijo?

—Que había pasado deslizándose por su lado casi rozándola.

—¿Qué? ¿Quién?

—El de arriba. El de la sala o el del cuarto.

—¡Tonterías! ¡Ya estamos otra vez con las tonterías de siempre! No quiero volver a oír hablar de eso. ¿Y después se quedó junto a la señora?

—Sí, señor, me hice un lecho en el suelo, junto a su cama. Tuve que cogerla de la mano. Entonces se quedó dormida.

—¿Y aún duerme?

—Profundamente.

—Esto no me gusta nada, Johanna. Dormir mucho puede ser muy sano, pero también enfermizo. Hay que despertarla, aunque eso sí, con mucho cuidado, para que no vuelva a alterarse. Y dígale a Friedrich que no traiga aún el desayuno. Esperaré hasta que la señora esté lista. Actúe con mucha delicadeza.

Media hora más tarde se presentó Effi. Estaba encantadora, muy pálida, y se apoyaba sobre Johanna. Pero cuando vio a Innstetten se abalanzó hacia él, lo abrazó y lo besó, mientras las lágrimas corrían por su rostro.

—¡Ah, Geert, gracias a Dios que estás aquí! Ahora ya todo vuelve a estar bien. No vuelvas a marcharte, no vuelvas a dejarme sola.

—¡Effi, querida…! Déjelo ahí, Friedrich, ya acabaré yo de servir… Effi, querida, no te he dejado sola por desconsideración ni por capricho, sino porque debía hacerlo. No tenía otra elección. Desempeño un cargo, y no puedo decirles al príncipe y a la princesa: «Altezas, no puedo acudir porque mi esposa se siente muy

sola, o porque mi esposa tiene miedo». Si dijera algo así, eso nos pondría en una situación ridícula, a mí sin duda, pero también a ti. Antes que nada, tómate una taza de café.

Effi bebió un poco, y eso la animó visiblemente. Luego volvió a coger la mano de su marido y dijo:

—Tienes razón: reconozco que eso no puede ser. Sobre todo si deseamos, porque yo lo deseo tanto como tú, alcanzar una posición más privilegiada…

—Todas las mujeres sois iguales —dijo Innstetten, riendo.

—Entonces, decidido. Tú sigues aceptando las invitaciones y yo me quedo aquí esperando a «mi señor», como decía Hulda debajo del saúco. Por cierto, ¿cómo le irán las cosas?

—A las muchachas como Hulda las cosas siempre les van bien. Pero ¿qué más querías decirme?

—Quería decirte que, si no hay más remedio, me quedaré sola. Pero no en esta casa. Cambiémonos de casa. En el baluarte hay algunas muy bonitas. Hay una entre la casa del cónsul Martens y la del cónsul Grützmacher, y otra cerca del mercado, justo enfrente de la de Gieshübler. ¿Por qué no podemos vivir allí? ¿Por qué ha de ser aquí precisamente? Cuando venían a visitarnos amigos o parientes, les oía contar a menudo que en Berlín la gente se muda para evitar la simple molestia del ruido de un piano, o porque había cucarachas, o porque la mujer del portero era desagradable. Si lo hacen por semejantes pequeñeces…

—¿Pequeñeces, la mujer del portero? No digas eso…

—Si alguien se muda por cosas así, también sería posible hacerlo aquí, donde tú eres el gobernador y la gente quiere complacerte, y además hay algunos que te deben favores. Seguro que Gieshübler nos ayudaría, aunque sólo fuera por mí, porque me tendría lástima. Así que dime, Geert, ¿estás dispuesto a abandonar esta casa maldita, esta casa con su… con el…?

—¿Con el chino, quieres decir? ¿Ves, Effi, como se puede pronunciar la terrible palabra sin que se aparezca? Lo que viste, o lo que crees que viste, pasar deslizándose junto a tu cama fue el chinito que las chicas pegaron en el respaldo de la silla de arriba; apuesto a que llevaba una casaca azul y un sombrero muy plano con un reluciente botón en lo alto.

Effi asintió con la cabeza.

—¿Lo ves? ¡Un sueño, una alucinación! Y supongo que anoche Johanna te contaría algo sobre la boda que se celebró ahí arriba…

—No.

—Mejor así.

—No me contó ni una sola palabra. Pero me doy cuenta de que en todo esto hay algo muy extraño. Y ya sólo faltaba el cocodrilo. Todo en esta casa es tan siniestro…

—La primera noche, cuando viste el cocodrilo, encontraste que era como de cuento de hadas…

—Sí, entonces…

—… y además, Effi, no puedo irme de aquí así como así, aunque pudiese vender la casa o arreglar un intercambio. Es lo mismo que lo de rechazar las invitaciones para ir a Varzin. No puedo permitir que la gente vaya diciendo por la ciudad que el gobernador Innstetten se cambia de casa porque su mujer ha visto al chinito de una estampa aparecerse como un fantasma junto a su cama. Esa sería mi perdición, Effi. Nadie podría sobreponerse a un ridículo semejante.

—Ya, Geert. Pero ¿estás seguro de que no existe algo de eso que estoy diciendo?

—No te lo puedo asegurar. Es una cosa en la que se puede creer o, preferiblemente, no creer, pero aun admitiendo que hubiera algo, ¿qué hay de malo en ello? Mucho más peligrosos son los bacilos que flotan en el aire, y de los cuales supongo que habrás oído hablar, que todas esas historias de fantasmas.

Si es que realmente existen. Y me sorprende que precisamente alguien como tú, una Briest, pueda sentir tal miedo y repulsión, propios de una muchachita de familia pequeñoburguesa. Los fantasmas son un privilegio, como el árbol genealógico y todo eso, y conozco familias que antes prescindirían de su escudo de armas que de su «dama blanca», que también puede ser negra.

Effi guardaba silencio.

—Y bien, Effi, ¿no dices nada?

—¿Qué quieres que te diga? Hasta ahora he cedido en todo y he mostrado la mejor disposición posible; sin embargo, encuentro que tú también podrías ser más comprensivo. ¡Si supieras cuánto significaría para mí…! He sufrido mucho, de verdad, muchísimo, y cuando te he visto he pensado que me libraría definitivamente de mi angustia. Pero ahora te limitas a decirme que no tienes ganas de hacer el ridículo, ni ante el príncipe ni ante la ciudad. No me sirve de mucho consuelo. Más bien de muy poco, y sobre todo porque acabas de contradecirte, ya que no sólo pareces creer en la existencia de esas cosas que me llenan de miedo, sino que además me exiges que muestre orgullo aristocrático por estar en posesión de un fantasma. Pues no, no puedo hacerlo. Y cuando hablas de esas familias que conceden el mismo valor a sus fantasmas

que a sus blasones, supongo que debe de ser cuestión de gustos. Yo concedo sin duda más valor a mi escudo. Gracias a Dios, nosotros, los Briest, no tenemos ninguna clase de fantasmas. Los Briest siempre hemos sido muy buena gente, tal vez por eso no los hemos tenido.

La discusión hubiese continuado, e incluso conducido al primer grave desacuerdo, si en aquel punto no hubiera entrado Friedrich trayendo una misiva para la señora.

—De parte del señor Gieshübler. El recadero espera contestación.

Toda señal de enojo desapareció como por ensalmo del rostro de Effi; el simple nombre de Gieshübler tuvo en ella un efecto balsámico, y su alegría aumentó al echar una ojeada a la misiva. En realidad no era una carta, sino un billete con la dirección —«Señora baronesa Von Innstetten, nacida Von Briest»— escrita en una preciosa caligrafía presidencial y, en lugar del sello, una estampita redonda con una lira atravesada por una batuta, que del mismo modo podría ser una flecha. Ella le pasó el billete a su marido, que también lo contempló admirado.

—Pero léelo ya. A ver qué nos dice Gieshübler. Y Effi desplegó el billete y leyó:

Mi muy distinguida señora baronesa:

Permítame añadir a mis más respetuosos saludos matinales una humilde súplica. En el tren de mediodía llegará hoy a Kessin una antigua y apreciada amiga mía, la señorita Marietta Trippelli, hija de esta noble ciudad, quien permanecerá entre nosotros hasta mañana por la mañana. El día 17 debe estar en San Petersburgo, donde tiene previsto ofrecer una serie de conciertos hasta finales de enero, y donde, una vez más, el príncipe Kotschukoff le abrirá las puertas de su hospitalaria mansión. En un nuevo gesto de la bondad que siempre me ha dispensado, la señorita Trippelli me ha concedido el honor de pasar la velada en mi casa e interpretar algunos *Lieder* de mi entera elección (para ella no existe nada difícil). ¿Se dignará la señora baronesa a honrar con su presencia esta velada musical? Comenzará a las siete. Su señor esposo, con cuya presencia cuento, accederá sin duda a mi humilde petición. Sólo asistirán el pastor Lindequist (que la acompañará al piano) y, naturalmente, la señora viuda del pastor Trippel.

Su más devoto servidor,

A. GIESHÜBLER

—Y bien… —dijo Innstetten—. ¿Sí o no?

—Por supuesto que sí. Esto me distraerá. Además, no puedo rechazar la primera invitación de mi buen Gieshübler.

—Muy bien. Friedrich, dígale a Mirambo, que seguramente ha sido el portador de la misiva, que será un honor para nosotros.

Friedrich salió. Cuando se quedaron solos, Effi preguntó:

—¿Quién es Mirambo?

—El auténtico Mirambo es el jefe de una cuadrilla de bandidos de África… Del lago Tanganica, aunque no sé si tus conocimientos geográficos llegan hasta tales latitudes. Pero este que ha venido no es más que el factótum general de Gieshübler, quien además provee su carbonera y quien muy probablemente nos servirá esta noche vestido de frac y guante blanco.

Era obvio que aquel pequeño incidente había tenido sobre Effi un efecto beneficioso y que había recuperado en parte su serenidad. Pero Innstetten quería hacer algo que contribuyese a acelerar su total restablecimiento.

—Me alegra que hayas dicho que sí tan deprisa y sin vacilación. Ahora quisiera hacerte otra proposición que ayude a devolverte el buen humor. Veo que todavía estás algo alterada por lo ocurrido esta noche, y eso no es bueno para mi querida Effi. Hemos de olvidarlo por completo, y para eso nada hay mejor que el aire libre. Hace un tiempo magnifico, fresco y suave a la vez, y apenas sopla una ligera brisa. ¿Qué te parecería una larga excursión por el campo, más allá de la plantación, y por supuesto en trineo, muy bien abrigados surcando el blanco manto de nieve entre el repicar de los cascabeles? A las cuatro ya habremos vuelto, descansas un poco, y a las siete estaremos en casa de Gieshübler para escuchar a la señorita Trippelli.

¿Qué te parece?

Effi le tomó la mano.

—¡Qué bueno eres conmigo, Geert, y qué considerado! Porque he debido de causarte una impresión de lo más pueril, de niña malcriada, primero con mis miedos, y después con la pretensión de que vendas la

casa, y lo que es peor, de que renuncies a visitar al príncipe. Hacerle un desplante al príncipe… ¿a quién se le ocurre? Cuando, a fin de cuentas, es el hombre que decide nuestros destinos. También el mío. ¡Y no te puedes llegar a imaginar lo ambiciosa que soy! En realidad, sólo me he casado contigo por ambición. Pero no pongas esa cara tan seria. También te quiero… ¿Cómo es eso de cuando coges una flor y empiezas a arrancar los pétalos? Me quiere mucho, apasionadamente, con locura… —Effi rompió a reír alegremente. Y, viendo que Innstetten seguía callado, prosiguió—: Y ahora dime, ¿adónde iremos?

—He pensado que podríamos ir hasta la estación, pero dando un rodeo, y luego volver por la carretera. Almorzaremos en la misma estación, o mejor todavía, en casa de Golchowski, en la posada Príncipe Bismarck. ¿Recuerdas que pasamos por allí el día en que llegamos? Estas visitas son siempre convenientes; además, tengo que hablar sobre las elecciones con aquel *starost* investido por la gracia de Effi. Y es que, aunque él como persona no valga mucho, regenta muy bien su posada y la cocina es excelente. Las gentes de por aquí entienden mucho de comer y de beber.

Serían las once cuando mantenían esta conversación. A las doce, Kruse ya tenía preparado el trineo delante de la puerta, y Effi se montó. Johanna quiso traerle las pieles y un saquito para los pies, pero, después de todo lo que había pasado, Effi sentía tanta necesidad de aire fresco que lo rechazó todo, y aceptó solamente una manta doblada. Entretanto, Innstetten daba instrucciones al cochero:

—Vamos a la estación, Kruse. Tú y yo ya hemos estado allí esta mañana, y la gente se extrañará, pero eso no importa. Iremos siguiendo la plantación y luego giraremos a la izquierda, en dirección al campanario de Kroschentin. Dé rienda suelta a los caballos, tenemos que estar en la estación a la una.

El trineo se puso en marcha. El humo se estancaba sobre los blancos tejados de la villa, ya que hacía tan poco aire que las aspas del molino de Utpatel apenas giraban. Lo dejaron rápidamente atrás y pasaron junto al cementerio, donde las espinas de los arbustos de agracejos que sobresalían entre las rejas rozaban los pies de Effi y salpicaban de nieve su manta de viaje. Al otro lado del camino había una pequeña parcela vallada, no mucho mayor que un arriate, en cuyo centro crecía un joven y solitario pino.

—¿Ahí también hay alguien enterrado? —preguntó Effi.

—Sí, el chino.

Effi se estremeció, como si hubiera recibido un aguijonazo. Pero reunió fuerzas para dominarse y, con aparente tranquilidad, preguntó:

—¿El nuestro?

—Sí, el nuestro. Como es natural, no pudo ser enterrado en el cementerio parroquial y entonces el capitán Thomsen, que en cierto modo había sido amigo suyo, compró este terreno y lo hizo enterrar aquí. También hay una losa con una inscripción. Por supuesto, todo esto sucedió antes de mi llegada a Kessin. Pero la gente aún habla de ello.

—O sea que debe de haber alguna historia extraña detrás de todo esto. Esta mañana me ha parecido que insinuabas algo de eso. Y creo que, después de todo, lo mejor será que me expliques de qué se trata, porque hasta que no lo sepa todo, y por más buenos propósitos que me haga, seguiré siendo una víctima de mi imaginación. Cuéntame toda la verdad. La verdad no puede torturarme tanto como mis propias fantasías.

—¡Bravo, Effi! No quería hablarte de eso. Pero, ya que ha vuelto a salir el tema, más vale aprovechar la ocasión. Porque, de hecho, tampoco tiene nada de particular.

—Tanto me da que no tenga nada, mucho o poco de particular. Empieza ya de una vez.

—Eso es muy fácil de decir. El comienzo es siempre lo más difícil, también en las historias. A ver… creo que empezaré por el capitán Thomsen.

—Muy bien.

—Pues Thomsen, a quien acabo de citar hace un momento, pasó muchos años navegando por aguas de la China y traficando con todo género de mercancías entre Shanghai y Singapur. Tendría ya unos sesenta años cuando regresó para establecerse en Kessin. No sé si había nacido aquí o si le unía a la ciudad algún otro vínculo. En fin, Thomsen se instaló aquí, vendió su barco, un viejo armatoste por el cual no sacó gran cosa, y compró una casa, que es precisamente en la que vivimos ahora. Porque, al parecer, viajando por el mundo había amasado una gran fortuna. De ahí proceden también el cocodrilo, el tiburón, y por supuesto el barco… Así pues, Thomsen era, según me han dicho, un hombre muy cabal que gozaba de general estimación en Kessin. También por parte del alcalde Kirstein, y muy especialmente por parte del pastor que había entonces en Kessin, un berlinés que había llegado a la ciudad poco antes que Thomsen y contra el que gran parte de la población sentía inquina.

—No me extraña. Yo también he notado esa hostilidad. Aquí la gente es muy rígida y poco tolerante. Creo que es un rasgo muy propio de la Pomerania.

—Sí y no, depende. Hay algunas comarcas en las que la gente es menos estricta y va más a su aire…

Pero mira, Effi, ahí tenemos a la vista el campanario de Kroschentin. ¿Por qué no nos olvidamos de ir a la estación y vamos a visitar a la vieja señora Von Grasenabb? Si no estoy mal informado, Sidonie no se encuentra hoy allí. Podríamos arriesgarnos…

—Por favor, Geert, ¿cómo se te ocurre? Es una delicia surcar los campos como estamos haciendo, y sentir cómo me voy liberando y despojando de mis miedos. ¿Y ahora quieres que renuncie a todo esto para hacer una inesperada visita a esos vejestorios y muy probablemente ponerlos en un compromiso?

¡Por Dios, no! Y, aparte de todo, lo que quiero es acabar de escuchar esa historia. Estabas hablando del capitán Thomsen, al cual me imagino como un inglés o un danés, muy atildado, con su alto cuello almidonado y su camisa inmaculada…

—Exacto. Así es como dicen que era. Con él vivía una joven de unos veinte años, que según unos era su sobrina y según otros su nieta, lo cual, teniendo en cuenta la edad, parecía casi imposible. Aparte de la sobrina o nieta, en su casa vivía un chino, el mismo que está sepultado entre las dunas y por cuya tumba acabamos de pasar.

—¿Y bien…?

—Pues este chino era el criado de Thomsen, pero este le apreciaba tanto que lo consideraba más como un amigo que como un sirviente. Y así fueron pasando los años. De pronto empezaron a circular rumores de que la nieta de Thomsen, que creo que se llamaba Nina, iba a casarse conforme a los deseos del viejo con un capitán también mercante. Y, en efecto, así ocurrió. Se celebró una gran boda en la casa, oficiada por el pastor berlinés, a la que también acudieron el molinero Utpatel, un protestante no anglicano, y Gieshübler, que tampoco inspiraba mucha confianza en la ciudad en asuntos de religión, pero la mayoría de los invitados eran capitanes y pilotos con sus esposas e hijas. Y, naturalmente, celebraron una gran fiesta. Por la noche hubo baile, y la novia bailó con todo el mundo; al final, incluso con el chino. De repente, empezó a correr la voz de que la novia había desaparecido. Y así había sido, sin que nadie llegase a averiguar nunca lo que había ocurrido. Al cabo de dos semanas, el chino murió; Thomsen compró el pedazo de terreno que has visto y allí fue enterrado. Pero el pastor berlinés afirmaba que también podría haber recibido sepultura en el cementerio cristiano, porque el chino había sido un hombre muy bueno, tan bueno como los otros. Nadie sabía exactamente, me dijo Gieshübler, a quién se refería cuando hablaba de «los otros».

—Pues, en este caso, discrepo totalmente con el pastor; no se puede decir algo así, porque me parece algo osado y del todo inconveniente. Ni siquiera el mismo Niemeyer lo habría dicho.

—Y el pobre pastor, que por cierto se llamaba Trippel, empezó a comportarse desde entonces de forma muy sospechosa, hasta tal punto que fue casi una suerte que muriese poco después, ya que si no lo hubieran cesado. Y la ciudad que antes lo había elegido se puso en su contra, como tú has hecho ahora, y el concejo aún con mayor motivo.

—¿Trippel, dices? Entonces, ¿tiene algo que ver con la señora viuda Trippel a la que veremos esta noche?

—Pues claro que tiene que ver. Era su marido y el padre de la diva Trippelli.

Effi se echó a reír.

—¡Trippelli! Ahora lo entiendo. Gieshübler escribió que había nacido en Kessin, pero me imaginé que sería la hija de algún cónsul italiano. Como aquí hay tantos apellidos extranjeros… Y ahora resulta que es alemana, y que es la hija de Trippel. ¿Acaso es una cantante tan buena como para atreverse a italianizar su nombre?

—El mundo pertenece a los osados. Por lo demás, es bastante buena. Estuvo un par de años en París con la famosa Viardot, y allí conoció también al príncipe Kotschukoff, que, como suelen serlo los príncipes rusos, es muy ilustrado y está por encima de los pacatos prejuicios de clase. Al príncipe Kotschukoff y a Gieshübler, a quien ella trata de tío y al que podría considerarse casi como tal, debe la pequeña Marie Trippel todo lo que es. Gieshübler fue quien la envió a París, donde gracias a Kotschukoff se convertiría en la Trippelli.

—¡Ah, Geert, qué emocionante es todo esto, y qué vida más vulgar he llevado en Hohen-Cremmen! Allí nunca ocurría nada extraordinario.

Innstetten le tomó una mano y le dijo:

—No digas eso, Effi. Respecto a los fantasmas, cada cual puede pensar lo que quiera. Pero líbrate de aquello que suele llamarse extraordinario. Lo que a ti te parece emocionante, incluyendo una vida como la que lleva la Trippelli, normalmente se paga con la felicidad. Sé muy bien del cariño y el apego que sientes por Hohen-Cremmen, pero a menudo te burlas de todo aquello y no eres consciente de lo importante que es llevar una vida tranquila como la de Hohen-Cremmen.

—Ya, ya —dijo ella—. Claro que lo sé, pero a veces me gusta escuchar cosas distintas, y entonces me

viene el deseo de presenciarlo e incluso de vivirlo. Pero te sobra razón. Y precisamente lo que más anhelo es tener paz y tranquilidad.

Innstetten la amenazó con el dedo.

—Effi, amor mío, espero que no cambies luego de opinión. Siempre a vueltas con las fantasías, primero esto y luego aquello.

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La excursión transcurrió tal como estaba prevista. A la una el trineo se detenía ante la posada Príncipe Bismarck, y Golchowski, feliz por tener en su casa al gobernador, supervisó personalmente la preparación de un excelente almuerzo. Cuando al final se sirvieron los postres y el vino de Hungría, Innstetten llamó al patrón, que se había acercado varias veces a la mesa para controlar que todo estuviera en orden, y le invitó a que tomase asiento con ellos y les contase los últimos acontecimientos. Golchowski era el hombre idóneo para ello: no se ponía un huevo en una legua a la redonda sin que él se enterara, y ese día lo volvió a demostrar. Tal como había supuesto Innstetten, Sidonie von Grasenabb, al igual que en la Navidad anterior, había ido a pasar cuatro semanas a casa del «predicador de la corte»; la señora Von Palleske, siguió explicando Golchowski, había despedido sin contemplaciones a su doncella a causa de una vergonzosa historia; y lo del viejo Fraude tenía muy mala pinta, y aunque decían que se había resbalado y caído, se trataba en realidad de un ataque al corazón, y se esperaba que el hijo, que servía con los húsares de Lissa, llegase de un momento a otro. Después de la charla intrascendente, pasaron a temas más serios y acabaron hablando de Varzin.

—Sí —dijo Golchowski—, ¡quién se imaginaría que el príncipe se convertiría en fabricante de pasta de papel! Es algo realmente extraño; de hecho, el príncipe no soporta la escritura, y mucho menos la letra impresa. ¡Y ahora va y pone él mismo una fábrica de papel!

—Tiene razón, querido Golchowski —dijo Innstetten—, pero a tales contradicciones nadie escapa en la vida, ni siquiera los príncipes y los grandes.

—Desde luego, ahí no hay grandeza que valga.

La conversación sobre el príncipe habría continuado si en ese momento no hubiese sonado la campanilla de la estación que anunciaba el paso de algún tren. Innstetten echó una mirada al reloj.

—¿Qué tren es este, Golchowski?

—Es el expreso de Danzig. No para aquí, pero yo siempre me acerco y cuento los vagones, y de vez en cuando se ve a algún conocido asomado a la ventanilla. Aquí mismo, detrás de mi patio, hay una escalera que sube hasta la vía, junto a la caseta del guardabarrera 417…

—Oh, vayamos a verlo —dijo Effi—. ¡Me encanta ver pasar los trenes!

—En tal caso, señora, tenemos que subir ya.

Los tres se pusieron en camino, y una vez arriba se instalaron en un jardincillo junto a la caseta, como es natural cubierto por la nieve pero donde recientemente se había despejado una pequeña parcela. El jefe de estación ya estaba allí con su banderola en la mano. Y en ese instante el tren atravesaba a toda velocidad la estación, y al cabo de un momento pasaba como una exhalación por delante de la caseta y el jardín. Effi estaba tan excitada que apenas vio nada; sólo pudo seguir aturdida con la mirada cómo se alejaba el último vagón, en lo alto del cual iba sentado un guardafrenos.

—A las seis cincuenta estará en Berlín —dijo Innstetten—, y una hora más tarde, si el viento sopla a favor, podrá oírse a lo lejos en Hohen-Cremmen. ¿No te gustaría ir en ese tren, Effi?

Effi no dijo nada, pero cuando él se volvió a mirarla vio brillar una lágrima en sus ojos.

Mientras el tren pasaba a toda velocidad, Effi se había visto embargada por una profunda nostalgia. Aunque las cosas le iban bien, continuaba sintiéndose como en un mundo extraño. En cuanto se quedaba encantada con alguna cosa, al momento le venía a la mente todo aquello que no tenía. Allí delante estaba Varzin, al otro lado relucía el campanario de Kroschentin, y más allá el de Morgenitz, pero allí vivían los Grasenabb y los Borcke, no los Belling ni los Briest. «Sí… ¡ellos!». Innstetten había tenido mucha razón al decir que cambiaba de humor con suma facilidad, y en aquel momento había vuelto a ver toda su vida pasada en Hohen-Cremmen rodeada de una agradable aureola. Pero, pese a toda la añoranza que el paso del tren

había despertado en ella, su carácter era demasiado voluble para que ese sentimiento durase demasiado, y ya en el camino de regreso a Kessin, cuando el rojizo disco solar vertía su amortiguado resplandor sobre la nieve, volvía a sentirse más libre que nunca y todo le parecía nuevo y hermoso. Y cuando, al dar las siete, cruzó el umbral de la residencia de Gieshübler, no sólo se sentía alegre sino incluso eufórica, a lo cual contribuyó sin duda la fragancia a raíces de valeriana y violetas que impregnaba toda la casa.

Los Innstetten habían sido puntuales, pese a ello llegaron más tarde que el resto de los invitados: el pastor Lindequist, la vieja señora Trippel y la propia Trippelli se encontraban ya allí. Gieshübler —en frac azul con botones de un dorado mate y unos lentes que colgaban de una ancha cinta negra, destacando como una condecoración sobre el blanco impecable de su chaleco de piqué— apenas podía dominar su emoción.

—Permítanme que les presente: el barón y la baronesa Innstetten, la señora viuda Trippel, la señorita Marietta Trippelli.

El pastor Lindequist, a quien todos conocían, permanecía a un lado, sonriente.

La Trippelli, de poco más de treinta años, con una apariencia muy varonil y una expresión que delataba un gran sentido del humor, había ocupado hasta el momento de las presentaciones el puesto de honor en el sofá. Una vez cumplido el ritual, mientras retrocedía para sentarse en una cercana silla de respaldo alto, dijo:

—Le ruego, señora, que a partir de ahora asuma usted las cargas y los riesgos propios de su rango. Porque, en este caso —y señaló el sofá en que había estado sentada—, bien se puede hablar de riesgos. Hace años que se lo llevo diciendo a Gieshübler, pero desgraciadamente en vano, ya que todo lo que tiene de bueno lo tiene de tozudo.

—Pero, Marietta…

—Este sofá, que debió de ver la luz del día hace al menos cincuenta años, está aún construido conforme a un anticuado principio de succión, y quien se confía a él sin haber puesto previamente debajo toda una torre de cojines se hunde en un pozo sin fondo, o en todo caso lo suficientemente profundo para que las rodillas se alcen como una pirámide egipcia.

Todo esto había sido dicho con desenvoltura y aplomo, en un tono que se podía interpretar como: «Tú eres la baronesa Innstetten, pero yo soy la Trippelli».

Gieshübler sentía un enorme afecto por su amiga y tenía el más elevado concepto de su talento artístico, pero toda su admiración no le impedía ver que la delicadeza en el trato social no era su fuerte. Y esa delicadeza era justamente lo que él cultivaba con más pasión.

—Querida Marietta —se apresuró a decir—, tiene una manera encantadoramente jocosa de tratar estos asuntos, pero, en lo que respecta a mi sofá, está siendo de lo más injusta, y cualquier persona entendida me daría la razón. Incluso un hombre como el príncipe Kotschukoff…

—Oh, por favor, Gieshübler, déjelo estar. Siempre a vueltas con Kotschukoff… Va a hacer que la señora se piense que pertenezco a ese príncipe, que por cierto no es de los más importantes y que no posee más de mil almas; mejor dicho, poseía, cuando aún se contaba en almas, y la señora se va a pensar que me siento orgullosa de ser su alma número mil uno. No, la cosa no es así, y usted, Gieshübler, ya conoce mi lema: «Libre como el viento». Kotschukoff es un buen camarada y un amigo, pero de arte y de temas por el estilo no entiende una palabra; de música, desde luego, ni gota, aunque componga misas y oratorios: cuando se dedican al arte, la mayoría de los príncipes rusos se inclinan casi siempre por lo religioso y la ortodoxia. Y entre las muchas cosas de las que no entiende, sin duda figuran también el mobiliario y la decoración. Toda su distinción sólo le llega para dejarse convencer de que las cosas hermosas deben tener un aspecto abigarrado y costar mucho dinero.

La discusión divertía a Innstetten, y el pastor Lindequist se mostraba visiblemente encantado. En cambio, la señora viuda de Trippel no hacía más que sufrir por el tono algo impertinente de su hija, y Gieshübler consideró oportuno cortar cuanto antes una conversación que iba volviéndose cada vez más difícil. Lo mejor para ello sería escuchar algunas piezas de bel canto. No era probable que Marietta eligiera canciones de contenido inapropiado, pero aunque así fuera, su arte interpretativo era tan grande que lo hubiera ennoblecido.

—Querida Marietta —dijo entonces—, he encargado nuestro modesto ágape para las ocho. Así pues, disponemos todavía de tres cuartos de hora, a menos que prefiera cantarnos algo alegre durante la cena o tal vez después de que hayamos acabado…

—¡Por el amor de Dios, Gieshübler! ¡Usted, el hombre de la estética! No hay nada más antiestético que un recital de canto con el estómago lleno. Además, y sé que es usted un aficionado a la buena cocina, todo un *gourmet*, la comida sabe mejor después de haber cumplido con las obligaciones. Primero el arte y después el helado de nueces, ese es el orden correcto.

—Muy bien, entonces. ¿Puedo traerle las partituras, Marietta?

—¡Traer las partituras…! ¿Qué quiere decir con eso, Gieshübler? Le conozco bien y sé que tendrá usted armarios llenos de partituras, y yo no puedo cantarle todo el repertorio. ¡Partituras…! El tipo de partituras, Gieshübler, eso es lo que cuenta. Y que sean para contralto…

—No se preocupe por eso.

Y el hombre empezó a buscar en un armario, abriendo un cajón tras otro, mientras la Trippelli movía su silla hacia la izquierda, alrededor de la mesa, hasta sentarse al lado de Effi.

—Tengo curiosidad por saber lo que elegirá —dijo. Y Effi se sintió un poco desconcertada.

—Supongo —contestó un tanto insegura— que algo de Glück, algo de marcado acento dramático… Por cierto, señorita, si me permite hacerle esta observación, me ha sorprendido enterarme de que sólo actúa en recitales de canto. Me había figurado que, con sus dotes excepcionales, se sentiría atraída por la escena. Su presencia, su fuerza, su voz… Yo no entiendo mucho, sólo he ido algunas veces a la ópera en Berlín, y eso cuando todavía era casi una niña. Pero yo habría dicho que Orfeo, o Krimhilda, o la Vestal…

La Trippelli hizo un movimiento de cabeza, con la mirada perdida en el infinito, pero no llegó a contestar porque en ese momento regresó Gieshübler con media docena de partituras que le entregó a su amiga y que esta fue descartando rápidamente.

—«El rey de los elfos»… ¡Bah! «Arroyo, no murmures»… Pero, Gieshübler, por el amor de Dios, está usted hecho una marmota, se ha pasado durmiendo los últimos siete años… Y las baladas de Loewe, que tampoco se puede decir que sean ninguna novedad. «Campanas de Speier»… Ah, el talán-talán de siempre, las típicas piezas vistosas, manidas e insípidas. Pero mira lo que tenemos aquí, «El caballero Olaf»… Esto ya está mejor.

Se puso en pie y, acompañada al piano por el pastor Lindequist, cantó el «Olaf» con gran maestría y seguridad, cosechando el aplauso general.

Luego fue desgranando otras piezas igualmente románticas, fragmentos de *El holandés errante* y de *Zampa*, y luego «El muchacho pagano», todo ello ejecutado con tanto virtuosismo como serenidad, con una Effi totalmente embelesada por los textos y la composición.

Cuando acabó de interpretar «El muchacho pagano», la Trippelli anunció:

—Ya es suficiente.

Y lo dijo de una forma tan rotunda que ni Gieshübler ni nadie más se atrevió a insistir con más peticiones. Y menos aún Effi, quien, cuando la amiga de Gieshübler volvió a sentarse a su lado, le dijo:

—Mi querida señorita, ¡no sé cómo podría expresarle mi agradecimiento! ¡Ha sido todo tan hermoso, tan bien ejecutado, con tanta maestría! Pero, si me permite que se lo diga, hay algo que aún admiro más en usted, y es la serenidad con la que es capaz de interpretar esas piezas. Yo soy muy impresionable, y en cuanto oigo cualquier mención a una historia de fantasmas me echo a temblar y pierdo totalmente la compostura. Y usted interpreta esas canciones con fuerza e incluso con cierto aire trágico, pero ahora mismo vuelve a estar alegre y despreocupada.

—En eso precisamente consiste el arte, señora. Y sobre todo en el teatro, del cual por cierto he tenido la suerte de poder mantenerme alejada. Me satisface haber sido capaz de resistir a sus tentaciones, ya que es algo que sin duda perjudica la reputación, es decir, lo mejor que tenemos. Además, te insensibiliza, como me han asegurado centenares de veces mis colegas. Se representan envenenamientos y apuñalamientos, y cuando Julieta ya está muerta Romeo le cuchichea algún retruécano al oído o incluso alguna malicia, o le pone en la mano un billete amoroso.

—¡Es inconcebible! Y, volviendo de nuevo a mi agradecimiento por esta velada, por ejemplo en lo referente a lo fantasmagórico en el «Olaf», le aseguro que cuando tengo un sueño angustioso, o cuando me parece escuchar en el piso de arriba una leve música o a alguien bailando, y luego resulta que no hay nadie, o cuando alguien pasa deslizándose al lado de mi cama, entonces pierdo totalmente el control de mí misma y no consigo olvidarlo durante días.

—Señora, lo que usted describe es algo muy distinto: es algo real, o que al menos podría serlo. Un fantasma que se pasee por una balada no me inspira ningún miedo, pero cuando un fantasma pasa deslizándose por mi dormitorio me resulta, como a cualquiera, ciertamente desagradable. A ese respecto nuestras sensaciones son las mismas.

—Entonces, ¿también ha vivido esa experiencia alguna vez?

—Por supuesto. Y además en casa de Kotschukoff. Pero esta vez he puesto como condición dormir en otra habitación, tal vez en la de la institutriz inglesa. Es una cuáquera, así que con ella estaré segura.

—¿Y cree usted posible que esas cosas ocurran realmente?

—Señora mía, cuando se tiene mi edad y se ha visto tanto mundo, y se ha vivido en Rusia, e incluso

medio año en Rumanía, entonces todo es posible. Hay mucha gente mala en el mundo, y luego también está lo otro, así que una cosa parece llevar a la otra.

Effi escuchaba con el alma en vilo.

—Yo —continuó la Trippelli— pertenezco a una familia bastante ilustrada y racionalista, donde podría decirse que mi madre es la excepción. Sin embargo, cuando apareció eso del psicógrafo mi padre me dijo: «Escúchame bien, Marie, tiene que haber algo». Y tenía razón, hay algo en todo esto. De hecho nos acecha por todas partes, a diestro y siniestro, por delante y por detrás. Ya se dará cuenta algún día.

En este momento se acercó Gieshübler y le ofreció el brazo a Effi. Innstetten ofreció el suyo a Marietta y, seguidos por el pastor Lindequist y la viuda Trippel, se dirigieron hacia el comedor.

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Era ya tarde cuando acabó la velada. Poco después de las diez, Effi le había dicho a Gieshübler que ya era hora de marcharse, pues la señorita Trippelli no debía perder el tren que salía de Kessin a las seis. Pero la Trippelli, que estaba sentada a su lado y había oído estas palabras, había protestado con su característica desenvoltura contra tan afectuosa deferencia.

—Ah, señora mía, tal vez crea que las personas como yo necesitamos dormir con regularidad, pero no es así; lo que los artistas necesitamos con regularidad son los aplausos y el elogio encendido. Sí, no se ría. Aparte de eso, a todo se acostumbra una, y también puedo dormir en el compartimiento, en cualquier posición e incluso sobre el lado izquierdo, sin necesidad siquiera de aflojarme el vestido. Claro que nunca voy ceñida; el pecho y los pulmones han de estar siempre libres, y sobre todo el corazón. Sí, señora mía, esto es lo más importante. Y, por lo que respecta al sueño, lo que cuenta no es la cantidad, sino la calidad. Una buena siesta de cinco minutos vale más que cinco horas de sueño agitado, sin parar de dar vueltas en la cama a un lado y a otro. Por lo demás, en Rusia se duerme magníficamente, a pesar del té tan fuerte que toman. Debe de ser por el aire, o porque se cena muy tarde, o también por lo bien que la tratan a una. No hay preocupaciones en Rusia. En este aspecto, ya que en la cuestión del dinero no hay apenas diferencia, Rusia es aún mejor que América.

Después de estas aclaraciones de la Trippelli, Effi se abstuvo de volver a insistir sobre su intención de marcharse, y antes de que se dieran cuenta ya era medianoche. Se despidieron de forma alegre y cordial, en un ambiente de bastante familiaridad. El camino desde la botica del moro hasta la casa del gobernador era bastante largo, pero el pastor Lindequist pidió permiso al señor y la señora Innstetten para acompañarles un trecho, lo cual contribuyó a amenizar el trayecto. Un paseo bajo el cielo estrellado era lo más indicado para que se pasaran los efectos del vino del Rin con que Gieshübler les había obsequiado. Y, como es natural, durante el camino toda la conversación giró en torno a la Trippelli. Effi la había iniciado evocando todo cuanto recordaba, y enseguida tomó la palabra el pastor. Este, hombre irónico, había interpelado a la Trippelli sobre toda clase de asuntos mundanos antes de preguntarle acerca de su orientación religiosa, y ella le había hecho saber que sólo conocía una, que era la ortodoxa. Cierto era que su padre había sido un racionalista, casi un librepensador, y que por eso hubiera preferido que el chino fuera enterrado en el cementerio parroquial; pero ella, en este punto, era de la opinión contraria, aunque personalmente gozaba del privilegio de no creer en nada. Pero no por ello dejaba de reconocer en todo momento que la falta de fe es un lujo sólo admisible en el ámbito privado, nunca a nivel público y estatal, y si ella fuera la responsable del Ministerio de Cultos, o simplemente de alguna diócesis, procedería sin contemplaciones. «Siento que tengo algo de Torquemada». Innstetten, que estaba muy animado, explicó que siempre había evitado hablar con la Trippelli de un asunto tan espinoso como el dogma, pero que en cambio había hecho más hincapié en el tema moral. En esa ocasión había planteado la cuestión de las tentaciones y los peligros a que están expuestas las personas que actúan dentro de la esfera pública, a lo cual la diva había contestado someramente, haciendo sólo alusión a la segunda parte del enunciado: «Sí, los peligros son constantes, sobre todo para la voz». Con esta conversación en torno a la Trippelli fueron repasando todo lo ocurrido en la velada, antes de finalmente separarse. Y no volvieron a acordarse de la amiga de Gieshübler hasta tres días después, cuando llegó un telegrama desde San Petersburgo dirigido a Effi: «Madame la Baronne d'Innstetten,
née de Briest. Bien arrivée. Prince K. à la gare. Plus épris de moi que jamais. Mille fois merci de votre bon accueil. Compliments empressés a Monsieur le Baron. Marietta Trippelli». Innstetten estaba encantado, y lo manifestó con una vehemencia que Effi encontró un tanto desproporcionada.

—No te entiendo, Geert.

—Porque no entiendes a la Trippelli. Me encanta su autenticidad; nunca se calla nada y siempre pone los puntos sobre las íes.

—Así que te lo tomas como una comedia.

—¿Y cómo quieres que me lo tome? Todo tan calculado… tanto allí como aquí, de cara a Kotschukoff y de cara a Gieshübler. Gieshübler seguramente abrirá un fondo para ella, o puede que sólo le deje un legado.

La velada musical en casa de Gieshübler había tenido lugar a mediados de diciembre. Poco después empezaron los preparativos para las fiestas navideñas y Effi, para quien de otro modo estos días habrían resultado difíciles, sintió como una bendición tener la responsabilidad de una casa propia a cuyas exigencias era necesario atender. Tenía que hacer previsiones, informarse, comprar, y todo ello impedía que se abandonara a la posible aparición de pensamientos turbios. La víspera de Nochebuena llegaron de Hohen-Cremmen los regalos paternos, y en la misma caja venían incluidas toda clase de bagatelas enviadas por los Jahnke: unas hermosísimas reinetas de un manzano que Effi y el maestro habían injertado unos años antes, así como unos escarpines y unos mitones marrones, obsequio de Bertha y Hertha. Hulda se limitaba a escribir unas cuantas líneas porque, según se excusaba, estaba acabando una manta de viaje a ganchillo para X.

—Eso no es verdad —dijo Effi—. Estoy segura que ese X ni siquiera existe. ¿Cómo puede seguir inventándose pretendientes imaginarios?

Y así llegó la Nochebuena.

Innstetten se había encargado personalmente de disponer toda la decoración para agradar a su joven esposa. El árbol navideño lucía con todas las velas encendidas y un angelito flotando en lo alto. También había un pesebre adornado con bonitas cintas e inscripciones, en una de las cuales se aludía a un feliz acontecimiento que tendría lugar el año próximo en el hogar de los Innstetten. Effi se ruborizó al leerlo. Fue a buscar a Innstetten para darle las gracias, pero antes de poder hacerlo cayó en el recibidor, siguiendo la vieja costumbre de la Pomerania, una caja llena de regalitos, al fondo de la cual encontró el más importante: una graciosa cajita de bombones recubierta de todo tipo de estampitas japonesas, dentro de la cual, junto con su delicioso contenido, había una pequeña tarjeta que decía:

Tres Reyes Magos llegaron a adorar al niño,
uno de ellos moro, vestido de armiño.
Un modesto boticario que es moro también,
cargado de especias hoy se presenta,
pero en vez de mirra e incienso, que no estarían bien,
trae bombones de pistacho y almendra.

Effi lo leyó dos o tres veces y experimentó una gran alegría.

—Las atenciones de un hombre bondadoso tienen siempre algo especialmente grato. ¿No te parece a ti también, Geert?

—Ya lo creo que sí. Es realmente lo único que da alegría, o al menos lo único que tendría que darla. A veces nos alegramos por cualquier tontería. Yo el primero. Pero, claro, cada uno es como es.

El primer día festivo tocaba ir a la iglesia; el segundo fueron a casa de los Borcke, adonde acudieron también todas las familias nobles del distrito con excepción de los Grasenabb, que no pudieron asistir «porque Sidonie estaba fuera», una excusa que todos encontraron bastante extraña. Algunos incluso murmuraron: «Al contrario, precisamente por eso tendrían que haber venido». La noche de Fin de Año se celebraría un gran baile en el casino, al cual Effi no podía dejar de asistir, y que en realidad era algo que deseaba, pues aquello le daría la oportunidad de ver por fin reunida a la flor y nata de la ciudad. Johanna trabajó sin descanso para preparar el vestido que su señora luciría en el baile; Gieshübler, que entre muchas otras cosas también poseía un invernadero, le envió unas camelias; e Innstetten, pese a ir con el tiempo muy justo, tuvo que acudir esa tarde a Papenhagen, donde tres graneros habían sido pasto de las llamas. La casa estaba muy silenciosa. Christel, sin nada que hacer, dormitaba en una banqueta que había acercado al lado del hogar. Effi se retiró a su dormitorio y se sentó ante un pequeño escritorio, colocado a tal efecto entre el tocador y el sofá, para escribir una carta a su madre, a la cual no había enviado noticias desde hacía semanas, exceptuando una tarjeta agradeciéndole la carta y los regalos navideños.

Kessin, 31 de diciembre

Querida mamá:

Por fin puedo enviarte hoy una carta bien larga, porque hace ya mucho tiempo (la tarjeta no cuenta) que no tenéis noticias mías. Cuando escribí la última vez estaba todavía muy atareada con los preparativos navideños. Ahora las fiestas ya han pasado. Innstetten y mi buen amigo Gieshübler hicieron todo cuanto estaba en su mano para hacerme pasar una Nochebuena lo más agradable posible, pero eso no impidió que me sintiera un poco sola y con el corazón oprimido por la añoranza, pensando en vosotros. En general, por más motivos que tenga para estar agradecida, alegre y feliz, no logro librarme de cierto sentimiento de soledad. Y si antes me reía, tal vez más de la cuenta, de las lágrimas sentimentales de Hulda, ahora recibo mi castigo por ello, ya que yo misma he de luchar por no verterlas, porque no quiero que Innstetten las vea. Pero estoy segura de que todo irá a mejor, a medida que nuestra casa vaya cobrando vida, lo cual sin duda va a ocurrir, querida mamá. Lo que hace poco os insinuaba ya es una realidad, e Innstetten me demuestra cada día su alegría por ello. No hace falta que te asegure que yo también me siento muy feliz, porque pronto tendré a mi alrededor algo lleno de vida y distracciones; como dice Geert, un «querido juguete». Tal vez tenga razón al utilizar esas palabras, pero a veces preferiría que no las empleara, porque siempre son como una pequeña punzada que me recuerda lo joven que soy todavía, y que tal vez mi lugar siga estando en el cuarto de los juguetes. Esta idea no me abandona un solo instante (Geert cree que es enfermiza), y hace que lo que debería constituir un motivo de máxima felicidad me haga sentirme más bien desconcertada. Así es, querida mamá; cuando las buenas señoras Flemming vinieron para interesarse por toda clase de detalles, me sentí como ante un examen para el cual no estaba debidamente preparada, y creo que mis respuestas fueron de lo más estúpidas. La verdad es que también estaba bastante irritada, pues lo que muchas veces parece interés no es más que curiosidad malsana, y resulta aún más importuno porque todavía falta mucho para el feliz acontecimiento, que no será hasta bien entrado el verano. Calculo que será hacia primeros de julio. Entonces tendrás que venir o, mejor aún, en cuanto mi estado me lo permita, yo misma iré allí, me tomo unas vacaciones y cojo el tren para Hohen-Cremmen. ¡Ah, no te puedes imaginar la ilusión que me hace, y cómo añoro el aire de Havelland! Aquí hace casi siempre frío y mal tiempo. Saldremos de excursión todos los días por las marismas, con sus colores rojizos y amarillentos, y ya me imagino a la criatura tendiendo sus manitas al aire, porque sin duda sentirá que aquel es realmente su hogar. Pero esto lo escribo sólo para ti. Innstetten no tiene que saber nada de esto, y también debo pedirte que me perdones por querer ir yo con la criatura a Hohen-Cremmen y anunciarte mi propósito con tanta antelación, en lugar de invitarte de todo corazón y de forma insistente a que seas tú, querida mamá, la que venga a Kessin, adonde cada verano acuden unos mil quinientos bañistas y vienen barcos de todos los países y banderas del mundo, y que cuenta incluso con su hotel en las dunas. Pero el hecho de que muestre tan poca hospitalidad no es porque no quiera que vengas, ya sabes que no soy tan descastada, sino a causa de nuestra casa. Por más cosas bonitas y distinguidas que tenga, en realidad no acaba de ser una casa como Dios manda, sino tan sólo un lugar para que vivan apenas dos personas, ya que ni siquiera tenemos comedor, lo cual resultaría bastante incómodo si algún día llegáramos a tener invitados. Desde luego, hay espacio de sobra en el piso de arriba: una gran sala y cuatro habitaciones pequeñas, aunque todas ellas muy poco acogedoras, y me atrevería a llamarlas cuartos trasteros si al menos hubiera allí algunos cachivaches, pero están totalmente vacías con la excepción de unas sillas de mimbre, que lo menos que se puede decir es que causan una impresión de lo más extraña. Probablemente pensarás que todo eso es fácil de cambiar. Pero no es así, porque la casa en que vivimos es… es una casa con fantasma. Ya está, ya lo he dicho. Te suplico, mamá, que no menciones nada de esto en tu respuesta, porque siempre enseño vuestras cartas a Innstetten y se pondría hecho una furia si se enterase de que te he contado esto. Y la verdad es que tampoco debería haberlo hecho, ya que desde hace algunas semanas he estado muy tranquila y he dejado de tener miedo. Pero Johanna me dice que el fantasma siempre reaparece cuando llega alguien nuevo a la casa. ¡Y yo no puedo exponerte a semejante peligro o, si suena demasiado exagerado, a una molestia tan extraña y desagradable! Hoy no quiero importunarte más con esta historia; si acaso, no me extenderé mucho. Se trataba de un viejo capitán de barco, que había sido navegante en China, y de su nieta, que durante un tiempo estuvo prometida con un joven capitán del lugar y que desapareció el mismo día de su boda. Hasta aquí la cosa no parece nada del otro mundo. Pero lo más importante es que también había un joven chino, a quien el viejo se había traído de China y que primero había sido su criado y luego su amigo, y que murió poco después y fue enterrado en un lugar solitario al lado del cementerio. No hace mucho pasé por allí, pero volví rápidamente la cabeza hacia otro lado porque pensé que, si no, lo habría visto sentado sobre su tumba. Y es que… ay, querida mamá, ya lo había visto antes una vez, o al menos eso me pareció, cuando estaba profundamente dormida e Innstetten estaba de visita en casa del príncipe. Fue espantoso, no me gustaría volver a vivir algo así. Y comprenderás que a una casa como esta, por más bonita que sea (extrañamente agradable e inquietante a la vez), no me sentiría a gusto invitándote. Y respecto a este asunto, Innstetten, aunque finalmente me mostré de acuerdo con él en algunos aspectos, no se ha comportado, si me permites que te lo diga, del todo bien. Me pidió que me tomase toda esta historia como un cuento de viejas y que no hiciera caso de tales fantasías; pero de pronto me dio a entender que él mismo creía en todo ello, y me instó a que considerase esta casa encantada como algo distinguido y muy aristocrático. Pero a eso no puedo ni quiero acceder. Por muy considerado que se muestre en todo lo demás, a este respecto no ha sido suficientemente amable ni comprensivo conmigo. Porque hay algo detrás de todo esto, lo sé muy bien por Johanna y también por la señora Kruse, la mujer de nuestro cochero, que está sentada siempre en un sofocante cuarto con una gallina negra en el regazo, lo que de por sí resulta bastante inquietante. Ahora ya sabes la razón por la que quiero viajar hasta allí cuando llegue el momento. ¡Ah, y qué largo se me está haciendo! ¡Son tantos

los motivos que me llevan a desearlo! Esta noche tenemos baile de Fin de Año, y Gieshübler, la única persona amable de Kessin (a pesar de tener un hombro más alto que el otro… bueno, algo más que eso), me ha enviado unas camelias. Puede que incluso me decida a bailar. Nuestro médico dice que no me hará daño alguno, al contrario. E Innstetten, lo cual me ha sorprendido bastante, también ha consentido. Y ahora da muchos saludos y besos a papá y a todas las demás personas queridas. Feliz Año Nuevo de parte de tu

EFFI

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El baile de Fin de Año había durado hasta la madrugada y Effi había sido profusamente admirada, aunque no de forma tan manifiesta como su ramo de camelias, que todo el mundo sabía que procedía del invernadero de Gieshübler. No obstante, después del baile las cosas continuaron como siempre, y no hicieron ningún intento de llevar una vida social más activa, por lo que el invierno se les hizo bastante largo. Muy de vez en cuando recibían alguna visita por parte de las familias nobles del lugar, y cada vez que se veían obligados a devolverlas Effi comentaba con tono quejumbroso: «Muy bien, Geert, si no hay más remedio… Pero me muero de aburrimiento». A lo cual Innstetten se limitaba a asentir. Lo que en aquellas visitas se decía sobre la familia, los niños e incluso la agricultura todavía podía soportarse, pero cuando salían a relucir temas de índole más trascendental, con los pastores presentes dando muestras de una moral intransigente, incapaz de matizar y perdonar, y siendo tratados como pequeños pontífices, entonces Effi perdía la paciencia y pensaba con nostalgia en Niemeyer, siempre tan ponderado y modesto, pese a que en las grandes ceremonias pronunciaba unos sermones tan solemnes que todo el mundo afirmaba que tenía condiciones para oficiar en la misma catedral de Berlín. No acababa de congeniar con los Borcke, los Flemming y los Grasenabb, por muy buena que fuera la disposición de estas familias —a excepción de Sidonie Grasenabb—, y en lo referente a alegrías, diversiones o tan sólo el simple placer de la compañía, lo habría pasado bastante mal si no hubiera sido por Gieshübler. Este se ocupaba de Effi con atención providencial, y ella le estaba sumamente agradecida por ello. Entre sus muchas cualidades poseía también la de ser un ávido y ferviente lector de periódicos. Se hallaba al día en lo concerniente a la actualidad periodística, y no pasaba un solo día sin que Mirambo trajese un gran sobre blanco con toda clase de diarios y revistas, en los cuales aparecían subrayados los pasajes más significativos, generalmente con una fina raya de lápiz, pero a veces con una más gruesa de color azul, en medio de signos de exclamación o de interrogación. Y no se contentaba con eso, sino que también le enviaba higos y dátiles, o tabletas de chocolate envueltas en papel satinado y atadas con un lacito rojo, y cuando en su invernadero crecía alguna flor especialmente hermosa se la llevaba en persona, y entonces mantenía una agradable charla con la joven señora, que tan simpática le era y por la que sentía entremezcladas todas las formas del más delicado amor: el de padre y el de tío, el de maestro y el de admirador. A Effi la conmovía todo aquello, y a menudo hablaba sobre ello en sus cartas a Hohen-Cremmen, de suerte que la mamá comenzó a hacer pequeñas bromas acerca de su «amor por el alquimista». Pero estos comentarios sin mala intención no tuvieron el efecto deseado, e incluso causaron en Effi una impresión casi dolorosa, ya que, de modo un tanto confuso, le hicieron tomar conciencia de lo que faltaba realmente en su matrimonio: muestras de devoción y aliento, pequeñas atenciones. Innstetten era amable y bueno, pero no se mostraba como un amante. Sentía que amaba a Effi, y la conciencia de ello le hacía prescindir de cualquier esfuerzo por demostrarlo. Y casi se había convertido en norma que al anochecer, cuando Friedrich traía la lámpara, él se retirase de la habitación de su mujer a la suya. «Tengo que resolver todavía un asunto espinoso», y se marchaba. Como es natural, no corría la cortina de la puerta, y Effi podía oír cómo hojeaba los documentos oficiales y el rasgueo de la pluma sobre el papel, pero eso era todo. Entonces venía Rollo y se tendía delante de ella, sobre la alfombra que se hallaba junto a la chimenea, como diciendo: «Otra vez tengo que velar por ti, ya que no lo hace ningún otro». Ella se inclinaba y le decía en voz baja: «Sí, Rollo, estamos solos». A las nueve, Innstetten volvía para tomar el té, la mayoría de las veces con el periódico en la mano. Hablaba del príncipe, quien de nuevo estaba muy enojado, sobre todo a causa de aquel Eugen Richter, cuya actitud y cuyo lenguaje eran ciertamente intolerables; y luego pasaba revista a los nombramientos y condecoraciones otorgados, contra la mayoría de los cuales protestaba. Finalmente hablaba de las elecciones, y decía que era una suerte estar al frente de un distrito en el que todavía existía el respeto. Una vez que estos temas se habían agotado, pedía a Effi que tocase algo de *Lohengrin* o de *La valquiria*, pues era un entusiasta de Wagner. No estaba muy claro qué le había llevado a profesar semejante admiración: unos decían que

habían sido los nervios, pues aunque parecía muy tranquilo era en el fondo un hombre nervioso; otros lo atribuían a la postura de Wagner en la cuestión judía. Probablemente todos tenían razón. A las diez, Innstetten ya estaba rendido, y dedicaba a Effi algunas caricias cansadas, con más buena voluntad que apasionamiento. Effi las aceptaba, pero sin apenas corresponder a ellas.

Así transcurrió el invierno. Llegó abril, y en el jardín de detrás del patio, para gran alegría de Effi, comenzaron a reverdecer las plantas. Estaba ansiosa por que llegase el verano, con sus paseos por la playa y sus bañistas. Cuando echaba la vista atrás, convenía en que la velada con la Trippelli en casa de Gieshübler, y después el baile de Fin de Año, habían estado bastante bien. Pero los meses siguientes habían dejado mucho que desear; tan monótonos le resultaron que en una ocasión había llegado a escribir a su madre:

> ¿Te puedes creer que casi me he reconciliado con nuestro fantasma? Está claro que no querría volver a pasar una noche tan espantosa como la que pasé cuando Geert fue a casa del príncipe, eso seguro que no. Pero cuando se está siempre tan sola, sin que pase nada y sin ver a nadie, resulta también muy difícil de soportar. Y cuando me despierto por la noche, a veces presto atención a ver si escucho el deslizarse de zapatos en el piso de arriba, y cuando todo permanece en silencio casi me siento decepcionada, y me digo que ojalá volviese, aunque ni tan terrible ni tan cercano.

Corría el mes de febrero cuando Effi escribía esto. Ahora ya estaban casi en mayo, y en la plantación empezaba a florecer de nuevo la vida. Se oía el canto de los pinzones, y esa misma semana llegaron también las cigüeñas. Una de ellas sobrevoló lentamente la casa y luego descendió para posarse sobre un pajar que se erguía junto al molino de Utpatel. Era el lugar donde anidaba cada año. Incluso de este pequeño acontecimiento informó Effi a su madre. Ahora escribía más a menudo a Hohen-Cremmen, y al final de esa misma carta decía:

> Hay una novedad, querida mamá, que casi se me olvida contarte: desde hace unas cuatro semanas tenemos un nuevo comandante de la guardia territorial, pero… ¿lo tenemos realmente aquí? Esa es la cuestión, y además muy importante, aunque eso te haga reír. Es muy normal que te rías, porque no sabes la precariedad de nuestra vida social aquí, que sigue igual que antes. Al menos en lo que a mí respecta, ya que no consigo congeniar con la nobleza de los alrededores. Tal vez la culpa sea mía, pero eso da igual. El caso es que mi vida social es precaria, y por eso durante todas estas semanas de invierno he estado esperando al nuevo comandante de la guardia como a una especie de salvador, un portador de solaz. Su predecesor era un tipo atroz, de malas maneras y peores costumbres, que para más inri siempre estaba falto de fondos. Durante todo el tiempo que estuvo aquí no dejamos de sufrir por su causa. Por supuesto, Innstetten más que yo, y cuando a principios de abril nos enteramos de que había llegado Von Crampas, que es el nombre del nuevo comandante, nos arrojamos a sus brazos como si en adelante ya no pudiera pasar nada malo en nuestra amada ciudad de Kessin. Pero, como te he dicho antes, a pesar de que él ya está aquí, la situación no parece haber mejorado mucho. Crampas está casado y tiene dos hijos, de diez y ocho años. Su esposa es un año mayor que él, es decir, debe de tener unos cuarenta y cinco. Eso no debería ser ningún inconveniente. ¿Por qué no podría disfrutar de una maravillosa relación con una amiga maternal? La Trippelli tenía también unos treinta años, y ello no fue óbice para que nos lleváramos muy bien. Pero con la señora Crampas, que por cierto no es de familia noble, no hay manera de avenirse. Siempre está de mal humor, casi melancólica, como nuestra señora Kruse (a la cual me recuerda un poco), y todo por celos. Al parecer, su marido es un hombre que ha tenido muchas aventuras, un mujeriego, lo cual siempre me ha parecido algo ridículo, y que también en este caso me lo parecería si no fuera porque sus devaneos le llevaron a batirse en duelo con un camarada. El brazo izquierdo le quedó destrozado justo por debajo del hombro, y se le nota enseguida, pese a que la operación, como me ha explicado Innstetten, fue considerada una obra maestra de la cirugía. Una resección, creo que la llaman, y fue hecha por Wilms cuando todavía operaba. El señor y la señora Crampas vinieron hace un par de semanas a casa para hacernos la protocolaria visita de cortesía, y fue una situación realmente penosa, ya que la señora Crampas observaba a su marido de una manera que lo hacía sentirse bastante incómodo, y a mí incómoda del todo. De que Crampas puede ser muy diferente, y que es un hombre alegre y decidido, me convencí hace tres días, cuando estuvo a solas con Innstetten y desde mi habitación pude escuchar cómo conversaban. Después yo también hablé con él. Es todo un caballero, y muy educado. Durante la guerra, Innstetten y él sirvieron en la misma brigada, y luego han coincidido muchas veces en casa del conde Gröben, al norte de París. Ya lo ves, querida mamá, esta podría haber sido una gran oportunidad para comenzar una nueva vida en Kessin. El comandante no tiene tampoco los prejuicios de los pomeranios, aunque al parecer él procede de la Pomerania sueca. ¡Pero su mujer…! Sin ella no puede haber relación posible, pero con ella menos todavía.

Effi tenía mucha razón, y en efecto no se produjo ningún acercamiento real con el matrimonio Crampas. En una ocasión se vieron en la finca de la familia Borcke, otro día coincidieron muy fugazmente en la estación y, unos días más tarde, durante una excursión en bote río arriba hasta un bosque de encinas y bojes conocido como «el Charlatán», cerca de Breitling; pero se limitaron a un cortés intercambio de saludos. Así que Effi se alegró mucho cuando, a principios de junio, se anunció el inicio de la temporada de baños. Al

comienzo había pocos veraneantes, porque antes de San Juan iban llegando con cuentagotas, pero los preparativos constituían ya de por sí toda una distracción. En la plantación se instalaron tiovivos y barracas de tiro; los barqueros calafatearon y pintaron sus botes; en todas las casas se pusieron nuevos cortinajes, y las habitaciones más húmedas y algo enmohecidas se sulfataron y airearon convenientemente.

También en casa de Effi, en espera de otra llegada que naturalmente no era la de los veraneantes, reinaba una actividad febril. Incluso la señora Kruse se ofreció a colaborar en todo lo que pudiera, pero Effi se espantó ante la idea y suplicó a Innstetten:

—Geert, sobre todo que la señora Kruse no toque nada. No hace ninguna falta, y ya tengo bastantes preocupaciones sin ella de por medio.

Innstetten se lo prometió, dijo que con Christel y Johanna ya tenía ayuda de sobra y, para desviar los pensamientos de su mujer, dejó de lado el tema de los preparativos y le preguntó si se había percatado de que en la casa de enfrente se había instalado ya un veraneante, que, si bien no era el primero, sí había sido uno de los primeros en llegar.

—¿Un señor?

—No, una señora. Ya ha venido otros años, y se aloja siempre en la misma casa. Y siempre viene de las primeras, porque dice que no soporta la incomodidad de encontrarlo todo lleno.

—No se lo reprocho. ¿Y quién es?

—La viuda del archivero Rode.

—¡Qué raro! Siempre me había figurado que las viudas de los archiveros serían pobres.

—Sí —repuso Innstetten, riendo—, generalmente lo son, pero esta es una excepción. En todo caso, debe de tener algo más que su pensión de viudedad. Siempre viene con mucho equipaje, muchísimo más del que necesita, y parece una mujer muy peculiar, excéntrica, enfermiza y con las piernas muy débiles. Por eso desconfía de sus propias fuerzas y va siempre acompañada de una sirvienta bastante corpulenta, con fuerza suficiente para sostenerla o llevarla en brazos si le pasa algo. Este año ha venido con una nueva. Pero también es robusta, un poco como la Trippelli, sólo que más fuerte.

—¡Ah! Creo que ya la he visto. Tiene unos bonitos ojos castaños que inspiran lealtad y confianza. Pero no parece muy despierta.

—Sí, es ella.

Esta conversación entre Effi e Innstetten tuvo lugar a mediados de junio. Desde entonces cada nuevo día trajo consigo un notable incremento en el número de veraneantes, e ir paseando hasta el baluarte para esperar la llegada del vapor se convirtió, como siempre por esa época, en una especie de ocupación cotidiana para las gentes de Kessin. Por supuesto, Effi tuvo que renunciar a tales paseos, ya que Innstetten no podía acompañarla, pero al menos disfrutaba del placer de ver la animación en la calle, hasta entonces tan triste y solitaria, que conducía a la playa y al hotel de las dunas. Para no perder detalle del espectáculo, pasaba mucho más tiempo del habitual en su dormitorio, ya que sus ventanas ofrecían las mejores vistas. Johanna se colocaba a su lado y contestaba a casi todo lo que la señora quería saber, pues la mayoría de los visitantes venían desde hacía años y la doncella no sólo sabía sus nombres, sino que también conocía alguna historia.

Todo esto servía de distracción a Effi. Pero justo el día de San Juan, poco antes de las once de la mañana, cuando más animado y colorido era el ambiente por la llegada del vapor, desde el centro de la ciudad, en lugar de los coches de alquiler con matrimonios, niños y baúles, bajó por la calle en dirección a la plantación una carroza fúnebre (seguida de dos coches negros), que se detuvo ante la casa que había frente a la residencia del gobernador. Y es que la señora viuda del archivero Rode había fallecido hacía tres días, y cuando llegaron los parientes de Berlín, que habían sido avisados de urgencia, estos decidieron no trasladar el cuerpo a la capital, sino darle sepultura en el cementerio de las dunas de Kessin. Effi, de pie junto a la ventana, contemplaba con curiosidad la escena extrañamente solemne que tenía lugar enfrente. Los recién llegados de Berlín eran dos sobrinos y sus esposas, todos de unos cuarenta años y con un color de cara que denotaba una salud envidiable. Los sobrinos, vestidos con unos fracs de buen corte, resultaban aceptables, y la sobriedad de sus maneras de hombres de negocios era en el fondo más correcta que disonante. ¡Pero las dos mujeres…! Se esforzaban visiblemente por demostrar a las gentes de Kessin que el duelo era sincero, y llevaban unos mantos de crespón negros que llegaban hasta el suelo y al mismo tiempo ocultaban sus rostros. Después colocaron el ataúd, sobre el cual había algunas coronas e incluso un ramo de palma, sobre la carroza fúnebre, mientras los dos matrimonios tomaban asiento en los otros coches. En el primero, junto a una de las parejas de duelo, subió también Lindequist; detrás del segundo vehículo

caminaban la dueña de la casa y la corpulenta criada que había acompañado a la difunta señora a Kessin. Esta última se veía muy angustiada, una emoción que parecía del todo sincera pero que tal vez no debía atribuirse exactamente al duelo. En cambio, la dueña de la casa, que también era viuda, no paraba de sollozar con exageradas muestras de fingido dolor, y se veía de lejos que tenía en mente la posibilidad de una gratificación extra, aun cuando se hallaba en la privilegiada situación, muy envidiada por las demás caseras, de poder alquilar de nuevo las habitaciones para el resto de la temporada.

Una vez que el cortejo se hubo puesto en marcha, Effi salió al jardín de detrás del patio con el objeto de liberarse, entre las matas floridas y las hileras de árboles, de la sensación de falta de vida y amor que la fúnebre escena le había producido. Pero, como no lograba serenarse, le entraron deseos de dar un paseo más largo, no confinado a los monótonos límites del jardín, sino por un espacio más abierto, sobre todo porque el médico le había indicado que hacer mucho ejercicio al aire libre era lo más conveniente en su estado. Johanna, que la había acompañado hasta el jardín, le trajo un chal, sombrero y sombrilla, y Effi, con un amable «buenos días», salió de casa en dirección al bosquecillo, donde desde el amplio camino central partía un sendero que conducía a las dunas y al hotel de la playa. Al borde del camino había algunos bancos, y Effi fue tomando asiento en todos y cada uno, ya que andar la fatigaba y, además, ya se había echado encima el mediodía y hacía mucho calor. Pero cuando, una vez cómodamente sentada, observaba el ir y venir de los coches y de las damas con sus veraniegos vestidos, volvía a animarse, porque ver todo aquel alegre movimiento le insuflaba vida. Al final del pequeño bosque llegaba la parte más dura del camino: arena y más arena, sin ningún lugar para resguardarse a la sombra; pero, por fortuna, habían colocado algunos tablones y planchas de madera, y de ese modo, aunque acalorada y fatigada, logró llegar de muy buen humor al hotel de la playa. En el salón interior ya estaban sirviendo el almuerzo, pero la terraza estaba tranquila y solitaria, que era lo que en ese momento más le apetecía. Pidió una copa de jerez y una botella de agua de Bilin, y se dedicó a contemplar la inmensidad del mar, que centelleaba bajo el resplandeciente sol, mientras en la playa las pequeñas olas rompían deshaciéndose en espuma. «Allá enfrente está Bornholm, y más allá la ciudad de Wisby, de la que Jahnke me contaba siempre maravillas. Para él, Wisby era aún más importante que Lübeck, y más que Wullenweber. Y después de Wisby está Estocolmo, donde tuvo lugar el baño de sangre, y más allá los grandes ríos y Cabo Norte, y luego el sol de medianoche». En ese instante se apoderó de ella el deseo de ver todos esos lugares. Pero enseguida recordó la inminencia de lo que estaba esperando, y casi se estremeció de espanto.

«¡Es un pecado ser tan frívola y perderme en estas ensoñaciones de marcharme lejos, cuando sólo debería pensar en lo que está a punto de llegar! Puede que incluso merezca ser castigada por ello y perezcamos los dos, la criatura y yo. La carroza fúnebre no se detendrá entonces en la casa de enfrente, sino en la nuestra… No, no quiero morirme aquí, no quiero que me entierren en las dunas, quiero que me lleven a Hohen-Cremmen. Lindequist es muy buen pastor, pero prefiero sin duda a Niemeyer; él me bautizó, me confirmó y me casó, y quiero que sea también él quien me entierre». Y entonces una lágrima cayó en su mano. Pero al momento se echó a reír.

«¡Pero si estoy viva y sólo tengo diecisiete años! ¡Y Niemeyer tiene cincuenta y siete!».

Del comedor llegaba ruido de platos y cubiertos. Y de pronto le pareció oír el arrastrar de las sillas al retirarse; quizá los comensales se estuvieran levantando de las mesas, y ella quería evitar cualquier encuentro. Se puso rápidamente en pie, y decidió regresar a la ciudad dando un rodeo. Este camino la llevó a pasar por delante del cementerio de las dunas. La gran puerta estaba abierta de par en par, lo cual la incitó a entrar por el amplio paseo central. Allí todo estaba en flor, las mariposas revoloteaban sobre las tumbas, y allá arriba, en el cielo, sobrevolaban un par de gaviotas. Era un lugar tranquilo y hermoso, y le habría gustado quedarse allí un rato junto a la entrada, pero el sol caía cada vez con más fuerza y Effi continuó caminando por un sendero en sombra flanqueado por algunos fresnos y sauces llorones que crecían junto a las tumbas. Al llegar al final de este camino, vio a su derecha un túmulo de arena recién removida, con cuatro o cinco coronas de flores encima, y un poco más allá, algo alejado de la hilera de árboles, un banco en el cual estaba sentada la robusta mujer que había acompañado hasta Kessin a la difunta señora viuda de Rode. Effi la reconoció enseguida y se sintió conmovida al encontrar a la buena y fiel sirvienta, porque no podía ser considerada de otro modo, sentada bajo aquel sol de justicia. El entierro había terminado hacía más de dos horas.

—Es demasiado caluroso el lugar que ha escogido —dijo Effi—. Va a coger una insolación.

—Sería lo mejor que podría ocurrirme.

—Pero ¿cómo puede decir eso?

—Así me iría por fin de este mundo.

—No diga usted eso. No creo que se deba desear nunca algo así, por muy desgraciada que se sienta una

o aunque haya perdido a una persona querida. La quería usted mucho, ¿verdad?

—¿Yo? ¿A ella? ¡Válgame Dios!

—Pues se la ve muy triste. Debe de haber alguna razón para ello.

—Y la hay, señora mía.

—¿Sabe usted quién soy?

—Sí, es usted la señora del gobernador, que vive en la casa de enfrente. Siempre hablaba de usted con la vieja. Al final, ella ya no podía hablar, porque le costaba mucho respirar. Estaba muy mal del pecho, debía de tenerlo encharcado. Pero mientras pudo hablar, no callaba un momento. Era una auténtica berlinesa…

—¿Era buena?

—No; si le dijera otra cosa mentiría. Ahora yace bajo tierra, y no está bien hablar de los muertos, sobre todo cuando aún están calientes. ¡Que Dios la haya acogido en su seno! Pero la verdad es que no valía nada, era egoísta y tacaña, y de mí no se ha preocupado en lo más mínimo. Y los parientes que llegaron ayer de Berlín… se han pasado la noche discutiendo… Bah, tampoco valen nada, son de lo peor. Gente mala, avara, codiciosa y despiadada, que me han pagado el salario a regañadientes y porque no han tenido más remedio, ya que sólo faltan seis días para que acabe el trimestre. De lo contrario, no me hubiesen pagado nada, a lo sumo la mitad o la cuarta parte. Si hubiera sido por ellos, no habría recibido ni un céntimo. Y sólo me han dado un arrugado billete de cinco marcos para que pueda regresar a Berlín; supongo que me llegará para ir en el furgón de cuarta, sentada sobre mi maleta. Pero no me quiero ir; me quedaré aquí sentada, esperando a que me llegue el final… ¡Dios mío, ahora que pensaba que iba a poder vivir por fin tranquila! Habría soportado a la vieja, créame.

¡Y ahora me veo otra vez sin nada, teniendo que dar tumbos por esas calles de Dios! Y encima soy católica. ¡Ah, no puedo más! Me cambiaría ahora mismo por la vieja, me gustaría estar en su lugar y que ella siguiera viviendo. Vaya si le hubiera gustado seguir viva… Esas malas pécoras, que ya apenas pueden respirar, son las que más se aferran a la vida.

Rollo, que había acompañado a Effi en su paseo, estaba sentado a los pies de la afligida mujer y la miraba con la lengua colgando. Cuando ella guardó silencio, el animal se levantó, avanzó un paso y puso la cabeza sobre sus rodillas.

De pronto, el semblante de la pobre mujer se transformó por completo.

—¡Dios mío, esto debe de querer decir algo! He aquí una criatura que se compadece de mí, que me mira con aire amistoso y pone la cabeza sobre mi regazo. ¡Oh, Dios, cuánto tiempo hacía que no me trataban así! Y dime, bonito, ¿cómo te llamas? Eres precioso, ¿sabes?

—Rollo —contestó Effi.

—Rollo, qué nombre tan extraño… Pero eso es lo de menos. Yo también tengo un nombre muy raro. Nombre de pila, me refiero, pero es el que tengo.

—¿Y cómo se llama?

—Me llamo Roswitha.

—Sí que es raro; parece…

—Sí, señora. Tiene razón, es un nombre católico. Y encima de todo también soy católica. De Eichsfeld. Y eso precisamente te hace la vida más difícil y amarga. Muchos no quieren sirvientas católicas, porque van mucho a misa. «Siempre están confesándose», dicen, «pero las cosas más importantes, esas no se las cuentan al confesor». ¡Dios mío, cuántas veces habré tenido que oír eso! Primero, cuando servía en Giebichenstein, y luego en Berlín. Pero yo soy una mala católica, y he dejado de ir a la iglesia. Tal vez por eso me va todo tan mal. Sí, no es bueno abandonar la fe… más vale hacer las cosas como Dios manda.

—Roswitha… —Effi repitió el nombre y se sentó junto a ella en el banco—. ¿Y qué piensa hacer ahora?

—¡Ay, señora! ¿Que qué pienso? No pienso nada. Si quiere que le diga la verdad, lo que me gustaría es quedarme aquí sentada y esperar hasta caerme muerta. Sería lo mejor que me podría pasar. Pero entonces la gente creería que había querido a la vieja como un perro fiel, que no había querido separarme de su tumba y que me había echado a morir. Pero eso es completamente falso, porque nadie querría morir por una vieja como esa; yo sólo deseo morir porque vivir me resulta imposible.

—Me gustaría preguntarle algo, Roswitha. ¿Le gustan los niños? ¿Ha servido alguna vez en una casa donde hubiera niños?

—¡Pues claro! Ha sido lo mejor y lo más hermoso que me ha pasado. Con una vieja como esta berlinesa… y que Dios me perdone, porque ahora está muerta y comparece ante el Señor y allí me puede acusar… con una vieja como esta, es espantoso todo lo que tienes que hacer, a una hasta se le revuelve el estómago, pero con esas pequeñas criaturas, esas cositas tan lindas que parecen muñecas y que te miran con esos ojitos… eso le llega a una al corazón, le alegra la vida. Cuando estaba en Halle, serví como niñera en

casa de la señora del director de las salinas; y en Giebichenstein, donde trabajé después, crie a unos gemelos con biberón. Sí, señora, de eso sí que entiendo. Es como si hubiera nacido para ello.

—Pues muy bien, Roswitha. Quiero que sepa que la considero una persona buena y leal, quizá un poco brusca, pero eso no es nada malo, pues las personas francas suelen ser las mejores. Desde el primer momento me ha inspirado confianza. ¿Le gustaría trabajar conmigo? Tengo la impresión de que Dios me la ha enviado. Estoy a punto de tener una criatura, que Dios me ayude, y una vez que esté en el mundo necesitará atención y cuidados, e incluso quizá ser criada con biberón. Eso nunca se sabe, aunque no me gustaría que fuera así. Y bien, ¿qué me dice? ¿Quiere venir a mi casa? Estoy segura de que no me equivoco con usted.

Roswitha saltó de su asiento para coger la mano de la joven señora y besarla de forma impetuosa y emocionada.

—¡Ah, así que es verdad que hay un Dios en el cielo, y que cuanto mayor es la necesidad, más pronto llega el remedio! Ya verá, señora, como no se arrepentirá. Soy una persona muy formal y tengo buenas referencias. Ya las leerá cuando le traiga mi cuaderno. Señora, en cuanto la vi por primera vez me dije: «Si algún día pudieras trabajar para alguien como ella…». ¡Y ahora se ha hecho realidad! ¡Ay, Señor! ¡Ay, Virgen santísima! ¡Quién me lo hubiera dicho hace apenas unas horas, cuando enterraron a la vieja y los parientes se fueron dejándome aquí plantada!

—Ya lo ves, Roswitha, las cosas llegan a menudo de forma inesperada, y a veces son incluso para bien. Y ahora vámonos. Rollo ya está impaciente y no para de correr hacia la puerta.

Roswitha estuvo lista al momento, pero antes se acercó una vez más a la tumba, murmuró algo y se santiguó. Luego bajaron por el sombreado camino y cruzaron de nuevo la puerta del camposanto.

Un poco más allá estaba la pequeña parcela enrejada, cuya blanca lápida resplandecía bajo el refulgente sol de primera hora de la tarde. Ahora Effi pudo contemplar el lugar con más tranquilidad. El camino transcurría todavía un buen trecho entre las dunas hasta que, ya cerca del molino de Utpatel, llegaba al margen del bosquecillo. Allí giraron a la izquierda para tomar un caminito que lo atravesaba en diagonal, llamado el Reeperbahn o sendero de la cuerda, y se encaminaron hacia la residencia del gobernador.

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En menos de un cuarto de hora llegaron a la casa. Cuando ambas entraron en el fresco recibidor, con todos aquellos objetos extraños colgantes, Roswitha se sintió como sobrecogida, pero Effi no dejó que se entretuviese en su contemplación.

—Entre ahí, Roswitha —le dijo—. Esta es la habitación donde dormimos. Primero quiero ir a ver a mi marido a la casa de gobernación, ese gran caserón al lado de donde usted vivía. Voy a decirle que deseo que trabaje con nosotros cuidando de la criatura. Seguro que estará de acuerdo conmigo en todo, pero quiero contar antes con su aprobación. En cuanto la tenga, desalojaremos a mi marido para que duerma usted en mi alcoba. Espero que podamos acomodarnos bien.

Cuando Innstetten se enteró de qué se trataba, se apresuró a decir con excelente humor:

—Has hecho muy bien, Effi, y si no aparece nada grave en su cuaderno de referencias, la contrataremos fiándonos de su noble semblante. Gracias a Dios, el rostro rara vez engaña.

Effi se alegró de encontrar tan pocas dificultades, y dijo:

—Ahora todo irá bien. Ya no tengo ningún miedo.

—¿Miedo de qué, Effi?

—Ah, ya lo sabes… Pero a veces no hay nada peor que las cosas que imaginamos.

En menos de una hora, Roswitha había trasladado sus humildes enseres a la residencia del gobernador y se había instalado en la pequeña alcoba. Después de aquel día tan ajetreado se acostó temprano y, cansada como estaba, se durmió enseguida.

A la mañana siguiente, Effi —quien desde hacía unos días vivía de nuevo con miedos (precisamente había luna llena)— le preguntó cómo había dormido y si no había oído nada.

—¿Como qué? —preguntó Roswitha.

—Oh, nada… Como si alguien pasara una escoba, o se deslizara por el suelo.

Roswitha se echó a reír, lo cual causó muy grata impresión en su joven ama. Effi había sido educada en la más estricta doctrina protestante y le habría producido espanto descubrir en sí misma cualquier veleidad católica, pero no dejaba de reconocer que el catolicismo nos protege mejor frente a cosas como «las de arriba»; de hecho, esa consideración había influido mucho a la hora de tomar a su servicio a Roswitha.

Ambas mujeres congeniaron enseguida, porque a Effi, como a la gran mayoría de las señoritas de las comarcas brandeburguesas, le gustaba que le explicaran toda clase de anécdotas, y la difunta señora viuda del archivero Rode, su avaricia, sus sobrinos y las esposas de estos constituían una fuente inagotable. A Johanna también le gustaba escuchar esas historias, y cuando en los momentos más cómicos Effi estallaba en alegres carcajadas, ella también sonreía, pero por dentro no dejaba de extrañarle que la señora encontrase tan graciosas todas aquellas tonterías. Sin embargo, también fue una suerte que dicha extrañeza, que iba acompañada además de un fuerte sentimiento de superioridad, contribuyese a evitar que surgiera ninguna clase de disputa jerárquica. Roswitha no era más que un personaje cómico, y mostrar celos de ella habría sido para Johanna como tenerle envidia a Rollo por la amistosa deferencia que le dispensaban sus amos.

Así, entre agradables y entretenidos parloteos, transcurrió una semana bastante plácida para Effi, que ya no se sentía tan angustiada como antes frente al acontecimiento que se avecinaba. Por lo demás, tampoco sospechaba que estuviera tan próximo. Pero al noveno día se acabaron las charlas y la tranquilidad, y comenzaron las carreras y los sustos. El mismo Innstetten abandonó su habitual actitud reservada, y en la mañana del 3 de julio ya había una cuna junto a la cama de Effi. El doctor Hannemann, dándole unos golpecitos en la mano, dijo a la joven señora:

—Hoy se conmemora la victoria de Königgrätz. Lástima que haya sido una niña. Pero ya vendrá un niño algún día, y los prusianos tienen muchas grandes victorias que celebrar.

Puede que Roswitha pensara algo parecido, pero de momento sentía una alegría inmensa por la criatura

que ya había llegado, y de forma impulsiva se dirigió a ella como «LüttAnnie», lo cual la joven madre consideró como una señal.

—Ha sido una inspiración que Roswitha escogiera precisamente este nombre.

Ni siquiera Innstetten pudo objetar nada al respecto, y todo el mundo hablaba ya de la pequeña Annie mucho antes del bautizo. A Effi, que a mediados de agosto quería estar con sus padres en Hohen-Cremmen, le habría gustado aplazar el bautizo hasta entonces, pero no fue posible. Innstetten no obtuvo permiso y, en vista de ello, se fijó la fecha de la ceremonia para el 15 de agosto, pese a ser el día del aniversario de Napoleón (cosa que algunas familias no vieron con buenos ojos), y naturalmente en la iglesia. Como la casa del gobernador no disponía de salón, el banquete se celebró en el gran hotel del casino, en el baluarte, y asistió toda la nobleza de los contornos. El pastor Lindequist hizo un afectuoso brindis a la salud de la madre y la niña que fue unánimemente admirado, y que Sidonie von Grasenabb aprovechó para comentarle a su aristócrata vecino, un consejero áulico de acérrimas creencias:

—Sí, sus discursos en ocasiones como estas son pasables. Pero sus sermones no tienen perdón de Dios ni de los hombres.

Ni frío ni caliente, uno de los que serán condenados por tibios. No hará falta que cite textualmente las palabras de la Biblia…

A continuación, el anciano señor Von Brocke tomó la palabra para brindar a la salud de Innstetten.

—Señoras y caballeros, vivimos tiempos difíciles, y a nuestro alrededor sólo hay rebelión, pertinacia e indisciplina. Pero mientras tengamos hombres y, si se me permite añadir, mujeres y madres —y al decir esto hizo un elegante ademán en dirección a Effi—, mientras tengamos hombres como el barón Innstetten, de quien me enorgullece considerarme amigo, mientras tengamos hombres así, entonces lograremos salir adelante y nuestra vieja Prusia pervivirá. Sí, amigos míos, Pomerania y Brandenburgo juntos someteremos y aplastaremos la ponzoñosa cabeza del dragón revolucionario. Firmes y leales, así es como venceremos. Nuestros hermanos católicos, a quienes debemos estimar aunque los combatamos, tienen su roca de San Pedro, pero nosotros tenemos a Bismarck, nuestra *rocher de bronze*. ¡Viva el barón Innstetten!

Este fue bastante breve en su agradecimiento. Effi le dijo al comandante Crampas, que estaba sentado a su lado:

—Eso de la roca de San Pedro debe de haberlo dicho en honor de Roswitha; luego iré a preguntarle al viejo jurisconsulto Gadebusch si es de la misma opinión.

De manera incomprensible, Crampas se tomó en serio esta observación y desaprobó que hiciese tal consulta, lo cual divirtió sobremanera a Effi.

—Creía que sabía leer mejor entre líneas.

—Ay, señora mía, ante damas tan hermosas y jóvenes que aún no han cumplido los dieciocho años, cualquier intento de leer entre líneas está condenado al fracaso.

—Lo está estropeando aún más, comandante. Puede llamarme abuela si quiere, pero jamás le perdonaré que haga alusión a que aún no tengo dieciocho años.

Cuando se levantaron de la mesa, el último vapor de la tarde bajaba por el Kessine y atracó en el muelle situado delante del hotel. Effi tomaba su café sentada junto a Crampas y Gieshübler, contemplando el desembarco a través de los ventanales abiertos.

—Mañana a las nueve ese mismo barco me llevará río arriba. A mediodía ya estaré en Berlín, y por la noche en Hohen-Cremmen, y Roswitha estará a mi lado llevando a mi niña en brazos. Espero que no llore. ¡Ah, no saben cómo deseo que llegue mañana! Querido Gieshübler, ¿no ha sentido nunca esa alegría de volver a ver la casa paterna?

—Sí, yo también sé lo que es eso, señora. Aunque yo nunca he llevado conmigo a ninguna pequeña Annie, porque no la he tenido.

—Todo puede llegar —dijo Crampas—. ¡A su salud, Gieshübler! Es usted la única persona sensata que hay aquí.

—Pero, comandante, si sólo nos queda coñac…

—Tanto mejor.

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Effi se había marchado a mediados de agosto, y a finales de septiembre ya estaba de vuelta en Kessin. Durante las seis semanas que pasó en Hohen-Cremmen, alguna que otra vez había deseado estar de regreso en casa. Pero cuando entró de nuevo en aquel oscuro recibidor, iluminado sólo por el mortecino resplandor procedente del hueco de la escalera, de pronto volvió a sentir miedo, y dijo con voz apagada:

—En Hohen-Cremmen nunca se ve una luz tan pálida y amarillenta.

Aunque durante su estancia en Hohen-Cremmen había sentido en un par de ocasiones añoranza de la «casa encantada», en conjunto la temporada pasada entre los suyos había estado plena de felicidad y satisfacciones. Respeto a Hulda, que no llevaba muy bien lo de tener que seguir esperando marido o novio, estaba claro que no se iban a entender del todo, pero con las gemelas la cosa fue mejor que nunca, y mientras jugaba con ellas a la pelota o al cróquet llegaba a olvidarse por completo de que estaba casada. Realmente habían sido momentos de gran felicidad. Pero con lo que más había disfrutado había sido volando por los aires como antes, manteniéndose de pie sobre el asiento del columpio y pensando «ahora me caigo», experimentando un placentero escalofrío, una emocionante sensación de peligro. Cuando finalmente saltaba del columpio, acompañaba a las dos muchachas hasta un banco situado delante de la escuela, donde enseguida se reunía con ellas el viejo Jahnke, que escuchaba con agrado lo que Effi le contaba sobre su vida en Kessin, una ciudad medio hanseática, medio escandinava que, en todo caso, era muy diferente de Schwantikow y Hohen-Cremmen.

Estas eran las pequeñas distracciones cotidianas, a las que de vez en cuando se añadía algún que otro paseo estival por las marismas, la mayoría de las veces en el coche que solía usarse para las cacerías. Pero los mejores momentos para Effi eran las conversaciones que mantenía con su madre cada mañana. Se sentaban arriba, en el gran cuarto ventilado, mientras Roswitha mecía a la niña y cantaba en dialecto turingio toda clase de canciones de cuna que nadie comprendía del todo, tal vez ni siquiera ella misma. Mientras hablaban, Effi y su madre se acercaban a la ventana abierta y contemplaban el parque, el reloj de sol, las libélulas, suspendidas casi inmóviles sobre la superficie del estanque, o también la galería embaldosada donde el señor Von Briest, sentado cerca de la escalera, leía la prensa. Cada vez que pasaba de hoja se quitaba los lentes y miraba hacia arriba para saludar a la esposa y la hija. Cuando llegaba al último periódico, que solía ser la *Gaceta de Havelland*, Effi bajaba y se sentaba a su lado, o bien daban un pequeño paseo por el jardín y el parque. En una de estas ocasiones, caminaron por el sendero de grava hasta llegar a un pequeño monumento que el abuelo de Briest había mandado erigir en recuerdo de Waterloo, una pirámide algo oxidada con un busto de bronce de Blücher en la parte delantera y otro de Wellington en la de atrás.

—¿Das paseos como estos en Kessin? —preguntó Briest—. ¿Te acompaña Innstetten y te va explicando cosas?

—No, papá, allí no doy paseos como estos. Es imposible, porque no tenemos más que un jardincillo detrás de la casa al que ni siquiera se puede llamar jardín, porque en él sólo hay unos cuantos arbustos, algunas matas de verduras y tres o cuatro árboles frutales. A Innstetten no le interesan estas cosas, y creo que tampoco piensa quedarse mucho tiempo en Kessin.

—Pero, hija mía, tú necesitas hacer ejercicio y respirar aire puro, estás acostumbrada a ello.

—Ya lo hago. Nuestra casa está al lado de un bosquecillo al que llaman la plantación. Suelo pasear mucho por allí en compañía de Rollo.

—Siempre Rollo… —dijo Briest riendo—. Cualquiera que no te conozca, pensaría que quieres más a Rollo que a tu marido y a tu hija.

—Ah, papá, eso sería horrible. Aunque debo reconocer que hubo un tiempo en que no sé cómo me las habría arreglado sin Rollo. Fue cuando… en fin, ya lo sabes… Podría decirse que fue Rollo el que me salvó, o al menos yo me lo imaginé así, y desde entonces se convirtió para mí en un buen amigo en el que confío

plenamente. Pero, claro, no deja de ser un perro, y naturalmente lo primero son las personas.

—Sí, eso es lo que siempre se dice, pero yo tengo mis dudas al respecto. Los animales también son criaturas de Dios y poseen su propia naturaleza; por lo que respecta a esta cuestión, no se sabe todavía a ciencia cierta qué sería lo justo. Créeme, Effi, ese sería también el cuento de nunca acabar. Cuando alguien sufre un accidente, ahogándose o, peor aún, cayendo en el hielo quebradizo, si hay cerca uno de esos perros, un perro como tu Rollo, el animal no descansa hasta poner a salvo al desdichado y llevarlo a tierra firme. Y si el pobre desgraciado ya ha muerto, el perro se tiende a su lado y empieza a ladrar y gemir hasta que llega alguien; y si no llega nadie, permanece tumbado junto al cuerpo hasta que él muere también. ¡Cuando pienso en lo que hacen esos animales y lo comparo con lo que hacen las personas! Perdóname el pecado, Dios mío, pero a veces llego a creer que los animales son mejores que los hombres.

—Pero, papá, si le contase esto a Innstetten…

—No, más vale que no lo hagas, Effi…

—Estoy segura de que Rollo me salvaría, pero Innstetten también lo haría. Es un hombre de honor.

—Sí que lo es.

—Y me ama.

—Pues claro que sí. Y cuando hay amor, este tiene su correspondencia. Así es. Lo único que me extraña es que no haya pedido permiso para venir a verte unos días. Cuando se tiene una esposa tan joven…

Effi se ruborizó, porque pensaba exactamente como su padre, pero no quería reconocerlo.

—Innstetten es muy cumplidor y quiere estar bien considerado por sus superiores, porque tiene planes para el futuro. Para él, Kessin no es más que una etapa en su carrera. Y, después de todo, yo no voy a escapar de él. A mí ya me tiene segura. Si te muestras demasiado afectuoso… y encima con la diferencia de edad… la gente tiende a sonreír con cierta lástima.

—Tienes razón, Effi. Pero es algo con lo que tienes que contar. Por cierto, no comentes nada de esto a nadie, ni siquiera a mamá. ¡Es tan difícil saber qué es lo que conviene o no conviene hacer! Effi, ese sería también el cuento de nunca acabar.

Durante la estancia de Effi en la casa paterna, padre e hija mantuvieron algunas conversaciones más de este tipo, pero por fortuna sus efectos no duraban demasiado. También se desvaneció rápidamente la vaga sensación de melancolía que Effi experimentó al volver a pisar el umbral de la casa de Kessin. Innstetten se mostró pródigo en pequeñas atenciones. Después de haber tomado el té y haber repasado con alegre humor todos los asuntos amorosos y cotilleos de la ciudad, Effi tomó afectuosamente el brazo de su esposo para continuar la charla en la pieza vecina, donde se enteró de nuevos pormenores acerca de la Trippelli. Recientemente había reanudado una animada correspondencia con Gieshübler, lo cual significaba nuevos ingresos en su nunca bien equilibrada cuenta corriente. Effi se mostró muy animada durante toda la conversación, se sentía como una joven esposa, feliz y despreocupada, y se alegraba de poder librarse por fin de Roswitha, que ahora había sido trasladada al cuarto del servicio.

A la mañana siguiente propuso:

—Hace un día hermoso y apacible, y espero que el mirador que da a la plantación esté todavía en condiciones para sentarnos allí a tomar el desayuno. Ya tendremos tiempo de encerrarnos en nuestras habitaciones, porque es verdad eso de que el invierno en Kessin dura unas cuatro semanas más de la cuenta.

Innstetten se mostró totalmente de acuerdo. El mirador al que se había referido Effi, al que tal vez habría sido más justo llamar tienda de campaña, había sido arreglado a principios de verano, tres o cuatro semanas antes de que Effi se marchara a Hohen-Cremmen, y consistía en un gran entarimado abierto en la parte de delante, cubierto por una sólida marquesina y con unas amplias cortinas de lona a izquierda y a derecha, colgadas con anillas de una barra de hierro para poder correrlas y descorrerlas a voluntad. Era un lugar encantador, que durante la temporada de baños despertaba la admiración de todos los veraneantes que pasaban por allí.

Effi se había recostado en una mecedora y, empujando la bandeja del café hacia donde se sentaba su marido, le dijo:

—Geert, hoy podrías hacer tú de amable anfitrión. Me encuentro tan a gusto en esta mecedora que no me apetece levantarme. Venga, haz un pequeño esfuerzo, y si de verdad te alegras de volver a tenerme aquí, ya verás como yo también sabré corresponderte.

Y mientras decía esto iba alisando el blanco mantel de damasco, hasta que dejó su mano reposando. Innstetten se la tomó y la besó.

—¿Cómo lo has pasado sin mí?

—Muy mal, Effi.

—Bah, lo dices con cara de pena, pero estoy segura de que no ha sido así.

—Pero, Effi…

—Y te lo voy a demostrar. Porque si hubieses tenido aunque sólo fuera algún pequeño deseo de ver a tu hija… y ya no hablo de verme a mí, porque, al fin y al cabo, ¿qué soy yo para un señor tan importante, que durante tantos años ha permanecido soltero y tampoco tenía ninguna prisa…?

—¡Vaya!

—Sí, Geert, si me hubieras echado de menos, aunque sólo fuera un poco, no me habrías dejado tan sola durante seis semanas en Hohen-Cremmen, como si fuera una viuda, sin nadie más que los Niemeyer y los Jahnke, y alguna vez gente de Schwantikow. De Rathenow no vino nadie, como si me tuviesen miedo o ya fuera demasiado mayor para ellos.

—¡Effi, qué cosas dices! ¿Sabes que eres un poco coqueta?

—¡Gracias a Dios que lo dices! Porque eso es lo mejor que podemos ser para vosotros. Y tú no eres diferente de los demás, a pesar de que adoptes ese aire tan solemne y honorable. Lo sé muy bien, Geert… En el fondo, eres…

—¿Qué soy?

—Bueno, prefiero no decirlo. Pero te conozco muy bien; en el fondo, como dijo una vez mi tío de Schwantikow, eres un sentimental nacido bajo la estrella del amor. Y el tío Belling tenía mucha razón al decirlo. Lo que pasa es que no quieres demostrarlo, porque piensas que no queda bien y que puede perjudicar tu carrera. ¿He acertado?

Innstetten se echó a reír.

—No vas muy desencaminada. ¿Sabes, Effi, que te encuentro muy cambiada? Hasta que nació la pequeña Annie, eras una niña. Pero de repente…

—¿Qué?

—De repente, me pareces una persona totalmente distinta. Pero te sienta muy bien. Me gustas mucho, Effi. ¿Quieres que te diga algo?

—¿Sí?

—Estás seductora.

—¡Ah, querido Geert, qué cosa tan maravillosa has dicho! ¡Ahora sí que me has llegado al corazón! Sírveme media taza más… ¿Sabes que siempre he deseado oírte decir eso? Tenemos que ser seductoras, porque de otro modo no somos nada…

—¿Lo has descubierto por ti misma?

—Podría haberlo hecho, pero es una frase de Niemeyer…

—¡De Niemeyer! ¡Oh, padre celestial, qué pastor tienes! No, por aquí no tenemos pastores como ese. Pero ¿cómo se le puede ocurrir a él decir algo así? Es como si lo hubiera dicho un donjuán o un conquistador cualquiera.

—Vete a saber… —repuso Effi, riendo—. Pero… ¿no es Crampas el que viene por allí? ¡Y de la playa! No se habrá bañado, ¿no? A veintisiete de septiembre…

—A menudo hace cosas así. Pura fanfarronería. Entretanto, Crampas ya estaba llegando a su altura y les estaba saludando.

—Buenos días —le gritó Innstetten—. Acérquese, venga. Crampas, vestido de paisano, se acercó a donde estaban y besó la mano de Effi, quien seguía meciéndose en su asiento.

—Disculpe, comandante, que no le reciba con todos los honores de la casa, pero el mirador no puede considerarse como tal, y las diez de la mañana tampoco son horas. Es una situación menos formal, o si lo prefiere, más íntima. Ahora tome asiento y pásenos el informe de su acción. Por su cabello, que le desearía más frondoso, se ve claramente que acaba de bañarse.

Él asintió.

—¡Qué irresponsabilidad! —dijo Innstetten, medio bromeando—. Usted mismo presenció no hace aún cuatro semanas lo que le ocurrió al banquero Heinersdorf, quien pensó que el mar y su grandioso oleaje le respetarían por sus millones. Pero los dioses son muy celosos entre ellos, y Neptuno no tuvo ninguna piedad de Plutón, o al menos de Heinersdorf.

Crampas se echó a reír.

—¡Sí, un millón de marcos! Querido Innstetten, si yo tuviese tal cantidad de dinero, ¿cree que me habría atrevido a bañarme? Porque hace un día espléndido, pero el agua está a sólo nueve grados. Pero los que tenemos un millón de déficit, y permítanme la pequeña jactancia, podemos atrevernos a todo sin suscitar la envidia de los dioses. Y también hay un dicho que siempre me sirve de consuelo: «Quien ha nacido para la

soga no puede morir ahogado».

—Pero, comandante, no debería usted, si me lo permite, arriesgar su cuello por un dicho tan prosaico. Por cierto, hay muchos que creen que… me refiero a eso de lo que acaba de hablar… que más o menos lo merecemos todos. Sin embargo… para un comandante…

—… no es una manera muy habitual de morir. Lo reconozco, señora. No es muy habitual y, en mi caso, tampoco muy probable. Sólo era una cita o, mejor dicho, una *façon de parler*. Pero sí que soy sincero cuando digo que no espero ningún mal por parte del mar. Estoy convencido de que moriré como un auténtico soldado, y a ser posible con honor. De momento no es más que una simple profecía gitana, pero que no deja de resonar en mi conciencia.

Innstetten replicó, riendo:

—Eso resultará bastante difícil, Crampas, a menos que tenga intención de alistarse en el ejército del Gran Turco, o bajo la bandera del dragón chino, que son los únicos que ahora están en guerra. Créame, la historia aquí acabó hace unos treinta años, y quien quiera tener una muerte de soldado…

—… tendrá que pedirle una guerra a Bismarck. Lo sé muy bien, Innstetten. Pero para usted eso no resultaría muy difícil. Estamos a finales de septiembre; dentro de diez semanas, a lo sumo, el príncipe volverá a estar en Varzin. Y como siente por usted cierta debilidad, y me abstengo de emplear otra expresión más popular para no tener que enfrentarme al cañón de su pistola, estoy seguro de que si, para complacer a un viejo camarada de Vionville, le pidiera una pequeña guerra, no podría negarse. Después de todo, el príncipe también es humano y no le sería imposible convencerle.

Durante este intercambio, Effi se dedicó a hacer bolitas de pan, jugueteando con ellas y haciendo figuritas, para dar a entender que deseaba cambiar de tema. Sin embargo, Innstetten parecía dispuesto a dar réplica a las irónicas observaciones de Crampas, lo cual decidió a Effi a intervenir directamente.

—No comprendo, comandante, por qué tenemos que ocuparnos ahora de su muerte. La vida es algo que nos toca mucho más de cerca, y también es un asunto más serio.

Crampas asintió.

—Justo es que me dé usted la razón. ¿Cómo hemos de vivir aquí? Esta es, aquí y ahora, la cuestión; esto es más importante que todo lo demás. Gieshübler me ha escrito acerca de este tema, y si no fuese indiscreto y pretencioso, pues en la carta se trata de asuntos diversos, se la enseñaría… A Innstetten no hace falta que se la muestre, ya que no le interesan estas cosas… Dicho sea de paso, nuestro amigo tiene una caligrafía que parece bordada, y por su forma de expresarse cualquiera diría que fue educado no en la vieja plaza comercial de Kessin, sino en la antigua corte de Francia. Y el hecho de que sea algo contrahecho y lleve chorreras blancas que ya nadie usa (no sé dónde encontrará la planchadora), encaja con su persona admirablemente. Pues bien, Gieshübler me ha escrito acerca de los planes para las veladas de invierno en el casino, y también de su organizador, de nombre Crampas. Y eso, comandante, me gusta mucho más que tratar sobre la muerte de un soldado, por no hablar de la otra.

—A mí, personalmente, también. Y sin duda será un invierno magnífico, siempre que podamos contar con su asistencia, señora. Vendrá la Trippelli…

—¿La Trippelli? Entonces yo ya no seré necesaria.

—De ninguna manera, señora. La Trippelli no puede cantar todas las semanas, sería demasiado para ella y también para nosotros. En la variedad está el gusto, una verdad que los matrimonios felices parecen refutar.

—Si es que existen matrimonios felices, aparte del mío… —repuso Effi, cogiendo la mano de su marido.

—Así pues, variedad —continuó Crampas—. Y si queremos conseguirla para las veladas de nuestro casino, cuya vicepresidencia tengo el honor de ostentar actualmente, será necesario el esfuerzo de todos. Y si todos colaboramos, lograremos salir airosos de esta empresa. Las obras de teatro ya han sido elegidas: *Guerra en la paz, Monsieur Hércules, Amor de juventud*, de Wilbrandt, y puede que también *Eufrosina*, de Gensichen. Usted será Eufrosina y yo, el viejo Goethe. Se quedará usted asombrada cuando vea mi vis trágica interpretando al príncipe de los poetas… Si es que «vis trágica» es la expresión correcta.

—Sin duda. Además, me he enterado por una carta de mi corresponsal privado, el alquimista, de que, de forma ocasional y entre otras muchas ocupaciones, también es usted poeta. Al principio me sorprendió…

—Porque no doy la imagen.

—Justamente. Pero desde que me he enterado de que se baña usted a nueve grados he cambiado de opinión… Nueve grados en el Báltico es aún más frío que la fuente de Castalia.

—Cuya temperatura es desconocida.

—No para mí; al menos, nadie podrá contradecirme. Pero ahora debo levantarme. Por ahí viene Roswitha con la pequeña Annie.

Se puso en pie rápidamente y se dirigió hacia Roswitha, le cogió a la niña de los brazos y alzó a la pequeña en el aire, orgullosa y feliz.

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El tiempo era espléndido y continuó siéndolo hasta bien entrado octubre. Una consecuencia de esto fue que aquella especie de tienda de campaña que era el mirador se convirtiera en un lugar habitual para estar, hasta el punto de que Effi pasaba allí prácticamente todas las mañanas. Hacia las once llegaba el comandante, preguntaba en primer lugar por la salud de la señora y luego se dedicaban a criticar un poco a lo gente, en lo cual él era todo un experto. Después, Crampas quedaba con Innstetten para hacer una pequeña excursión a caballo, a veces tierra adentro, remontando el Kessine hasta Breitling, pero con más frecuencia en dirección a los espigones. Una vez que los caballeros habían partido, Effi se ponía a jugar con la niña, a hojear las revistas y periódicos que Gieshübler continuaba enviándole, a escribir una carta a su madre, o bien decía «Roswitha, vamos a dar un paseo con la pequeña Annie», y entonces la niñera se enganchaba como un caballo al cochecito con la sillita de mimbre y tiraba de él, y seguida de Effi se internaban un centenar de pasos en el bosquecillo hasta un claro donde había castañas esparcidas por el suelo, recogían algunas y se las daban a la niña para que jugara. Effi iba muy poco a la ciudad; prácticamente no tenía a nadie con quien hablar allí, después que fracasara un nuevo intento de trabar amistad con la señora Crampas. La mujer del comandante seguía mostrándose arisca y retraída.

Las cosas transcurrieron así durante unas semanas, hasta que de pronto, una mañana, Effi manifestó su deseo de salir también a pasear a caballo. Le apasionaba montar, y era mucho pedirle que renunciase a ello sólo por las habladurías de las gentes de Kessin. El comandante encontró la idea magnífica, e Innstetten, a quien era evidente que no le hacía mucha gracia —hasta el punto de que no cesaba de insistir en las dificultades de encontrar un caballo adecuado para una dama—, no tuvo más remedio que acceder cuando Crampas aseguró que él se ocuparía de eso. Y así fue, encontraron la montura adecuada, y Effi estuvo encantada de poder galopar por la playa, ahora que carecían de valor aquellos carteles que separaban los «Baños para señoras» de los «Baños para caballeros». La mayoría de las veces Rollo también formaba parte de la expedición, y como en varias ocasiones se les había ocurrido pararse a descansar en la playa o a hacer un pequeño recorrido a pie, acordaron hacerse acompañar por sus respectivos sirvientes, para lo cual convirtieron en palafreneros al ordenanza de Crampas, un viejo ulano de Treptow llamado Knut, y al cochero de Innstetten, Kruse, una transformación no del todo acertada consistente, con cierto pesar por parte de Effi, en endilgarles unas extravagantes libreas que no conseguían disimular sus verdaderos oficios.

Era ya mediados de octubre cuando salieron a cabalgar por primera vez con toda esta parafernalia: Innstetten y Crampas abrían la marcha, con Effi entre ambos, seguidos por Kruse y Knut. Rollo cerraba la comitiva, pero, como no le gustaba ir trotando detrás, pronto acabó pasando al frente. Poco después de dejar atrás el ahora desierto hotel de la playa, siguieron hacia la derecha por el paseo marítimo, rociado por la espuma de un oleaje moderado, y llegaron hasta el espigón, donde les apeteció dejar los caballos y seguir caminando hasta la punta del malecón. Effi fue la primera en desmontar. Entre los dos diques de piedra, el Kessine discurría ancho y tranquilo hacia el mar, que se extendía ante ellos como una inmensa superficie iluminada por el sol, rizada levemente por algunas olas.

Effi nunca había ido tan lejos, ya que cuando el noviembre anterior llegó a Kessin ya hacía un tiempo borrascoso, y en verano apenas tenía fuerzas para hacer marchas tan largas. Ahora se sentía encantada, todo lo encontraba grandioso y magnífico, y se sumía en mortificantes comparaciones entre el mar y las marismas de su infancia. Cada vez que tenía ocasión tomaba del suelo un trozo de madera arrastrado por la marea y lo arrojaba ora a la izquierda, hacia el mar, ora a la derecha, hacia el Kessine. Rollo se sentía muy feliz de poder lanzarse al agua tras el madero para servir a su ama; pero, de pronto, la atención del animal se dirigió hacia algo muy distinto, y avanzando cauteloso y casi atemorizado saltó de repente sobre un gran bulto que iba apareciendo a la vista. Pero en vano, pues en ese mismo instante una foca se deslizó suavemente por la soleada roca cubierta de algas verdes en que se hallaba, a apenas cinco pasos del mar, y se zambulló en sus aguas silenciosamente y sin salpicar. Durante un momento siguieron viendo la cabeza

del animal, que acabó sumergiéndose también.

Todos estaban muy excitados, y Crampas empezó a fantasear con la caza de focas, diciendo que la próxima vez habría que llevar escopetas, «porque esas bestias tienen la piel muy dura».

—Imposible —dijo Innstetten—. La policía del puerto no lo permite.

—¡Cada vez que oigo eso…! —repuso el comandante echándose a reír—. ¡La policía del puerto! Los tres efectivos que tenemos aquí bien podrían hacer la vista gorda. ¿Es que todo ha de ser siempre tan terriblemente legal? Tanta legalidad resulta aburrida.

Effi aplaudió con entusiasmo.

—Ah, Crampas, decir esas cosas es muy propio de usted. Y, como puede ver, Effi se las aplaude. Es muy natural: las mujeres acuden enseguida a la policía, pero no quieren saber nada de leyes.

—Es un antiguo privilegio de las damas, y ni usted ni yo podemos cambiar eso, Innstetten.

—No —repuso este riendo—, ni tampoco lo pretendo. No quiero meterme en camisas de once varas. Pero un hombre como usted, amigo Crampas, que ha crecido bajo la enseña de la disciplina y sabe muy bien que la ley y el orden son imprescindibles, un hombre como usted no debería decir esas cosas, ni siquiera en broma. Por supuesto, conozco muy bien su actitud despreocupada de que todo le trae sin cuidado, y también su muy personal afirmación de que el cielo no tiene por qué caérsenos encima. De momento no ha pasado, pero puede llegar un día en que pase.

Por un momento, Crampas se quedó un tanto desconcertado, pensando que había dicho todo aquello con una segunda intención. Pero no era el caso. Innstetten se había limitado a pronunciar uno de aquellos discursos morales a los que era tan aficionado.

—Por eso admiro a Gieshübler —prosiguió en tono más conciliador—, siempre tan caballero, pero sin renunciar a sus principios.

Entretanto, el comandante había recobrado su aplomo, y con su tono habitual dijo:

—Sí, Gieshübler es el mejor hombre del mundo, y sus principios son aún mejores. Pero, a fin de cuentas, ¿cuál es la razón de ello? ¿Por qué es así? Porque padece un «defecto». La gente que crece normal tiende a la frivolidad. Sin frivolidad, créame, la vida no valdría la pólvora de un disparo.

—Pues ya ve, Crampas, a veces eso es lo que se obtiene de tanta frivolidad —dijo Innstetten mirando el brazo izquierdo del comandante, algo más corto que el derecho.

Effi sólo había escuchado una pequeña parte de aquella conversación. Se había acercado al lugar donde había estado tumbada la foca, y Rollo la acompañaba. Ambos miraban al mar desde la verde roca, esperando por si la criatura marina volvía a aparecer.

A finales de octubre dio comienzo la campaña electoral, lo cual impidió a Innstetten tomar parte en las excursiones. Crampas y Effi tendrían que haber renunciado a ellas por temor a las habladurías, si no hubiera sido por la especie de guardia de honor que formaban Knut y Kruse. Gracias a ello, los paseos a caballo continuaron hasta bien entrado el mes de noviembre.

Como es natural, el tiempo había cambiado. Un persistente viento del noroeste arrastraba consigo grandes masas de nubes y el mar espumeaba poderosamente, pero la lluvia y el frío aún no habían hecho acto de presencia, y aquellas excursiones bajo el cielo gris y el estruendo de las olas eran casi más encantadoras que antes, cuando hacía sol y el mar estaba en calma. Rollo iba corriendo por delante, salpicado a veces por la espuma, y el velo del sombrero de amazona de Effi ondeaba al viento. En aquellas circunstancias resultaba casi imposible hablar. Pero luego, cuando se alejaban del mar y se adentraban entre las dunas o, aún mejor, en el bosque de pinos más al interior, todo se volvía más tranquilo; el velo de Effi dejaba de ondear y la angostura del camino obligaba a la pareja de jinetes a avanzar más juntos. Ese era el momento en que, trotando al paso para sortear las ramas y raíces que poblaban el camino, podían reanudar las charlas que el fragor del mar había interrumpido. Entonces Crampas, que era un buen conversador, contaba historias de la guerra y del regimiento, así como algunas anécdotas que revelaban pequeños rasgos del carácter de Innstetten, quien debido a su seriedad y hermetismo nunca había acabado de encajar con el alegre y desenfadado círculo de camaradería militar, razón por la cual era más respetado que querido.

—Sí, puedo imaginármelo —dijo Effi—. Por fortuna, no hay nada más importante que el respeto.

—Sí, eso es verdad hasta cierto punto, pero no siempre. Y además tenía unas inclinaciones místicas que solían ser motivo de conflicto: en primer lugar, porque a los militares no les hacen mucha gracia esas cosas; y, en segundo, porque teníamos la impresión, tal vez equivocada, de que en el fondo no estaba muy convencido de lo que quería hacernos creer.

—¿Inclinaciones místicas? ¿Qué quiere decir exactamente con eso, comandante? Supongo que no organizaría oscuras ceremonias religiosas en las que él hacía de profeta. Ni siquiera como el profeta de la ópera aquella… da igual, no me acuerdo del nombre.

—Oh, no, no llegó tan lejos. Pero tal vez será mejor que cambiemos de tema. No quisiera decir nada a sus espaldas que pudiera malinterpretarse. Por otra parte, también se podría hablar perfectamente delante de él de todas estas cosas. Se quiera o no, siempre se llega a conclusiones un tanto extrañas cuando el interesado no está presente para poder refutarlas o, simplemente, reírse de ellas.

—¡Pero eso es muy cruel, comandante! ¿Cómo puede torturarme de esta manera, excitando así mi curiosidad? Comienza a decir algo y luego vuelve a encerrarse en su mutismo. ¡Inclinaciones místicas…! ¿Es que acaso era un visionario?

—¡Un visionario! No, no era eso lo que quería decir. Pero le gustaba explicar historias de fantasmas. Y cuando nos tenía a todos atrapados, y a algunos incluso atemorizados, de repente hacía como si sólo hubiera querido mofarse de los más cándidos. Hasta que un día no pude contenerme más y le dije:

«¡Venga ya, Innstetten, todo eso es pura comedia! A mí no me engaña, nos está tomando el pelo. Usted tampoco cree en esas historias y sólo quiere hacerse el interesante, porque piensa que esas excentricidades le dan cierta distinción, y los altos cargos no se dan a personas vulgares. Y como usted tiene aspiraciones, se ha buscado algo que le distinga, y ha salido con el tema de los fantasmas».

Effi callaba, y al cabo de un rato ese silencio incomodó al comandante.

—¿No dice nada, señora?

—No.

—¿Puedo preguntarle por qué? ¿La he molestado, acaso?

¿O tal vez encuentra poco caballeroso que me haya mostrado algo crítico, y he de reconocer que así ha sido, con un amigo ausente? En todo caso, está siendo usted injusta conmigo, pues toda esta conversación podría mantenerla tranquilamente delante de él. Le repetiría palabra por palabra todo lo que acabo de decir.

—Le creo —repuso Effi, saliendo de su mutismo. Y entonces le contó lo que había pasado en su casa y la extraña actitud que había adoptado Innstetten—. No negó ni afirmó, y no pude sacar nada en claro de él.

—¡El Innstetten de siempre! —exclamó Crampas riendo—. Eso mismo hacía entonces, cuando estábamos acuartelados en Liancourt, y más tarde en Beauvais. Allí vivía en un antiguo palacio episcopal, que, por cierto, tal vez le interese saber que perteneció a un obispo de Beauvais al que llamaban acertadamente «Cochon», y que fue quien condenó a la hoguera a la Doncella de Orleans. Y no pasó ni un solo día, mejor dicho, noche, sin que Innstetten no tuviese alguna experiencia increíble. Nunca era algo concreto, siempre algo que quedaba a medias o casi siempre en nada. Y, por lo que veo, sigue funcionando conforme a este principio.

—Muy bien, Crampas. Ahora déjeme que le haga una pregunta seria, y le ruego que me responda en serio: ¿qué explicación le encuentra usted?

—Mire, señora…

—Nada de evasivas, comandante. Es algo muy importante para mí. Él es su amigo y yo soy su amiga. Quiero saber de qué va todo esto. ¿En qué piensa él cuando se comporta así?

—Querida señora, Dios ve en el corazón de los hombres, pero un pobre comandante de la milicia territorial no ve nada. ¿Cómo quiere que resuelva semejantes enigmas psicológicos? Soy un hombre sencillo.

—¡Oh, Crampas, no me venga con tonterías! Soy demasiado joven para poseer un gran conocimiento de los hombres, pero tendría que estar todavía en el limbo para tenerle a usted por un hombre sencillo. Usted es todo lo contrario, es un hombre peligroso…

—Es lo más halagador que se le puede decir a un militar que pasa de los cuarenta y está a punto de entrar en la reserva. Y con respecto a lo que piensa Innstetten…

Effi asintió con la cabeza.

—En fin, si quiere que le sea sincero, le diré que un hombre como el barón Innstetten, todo un señor gobernador que cualquier día de estos puede convertirse en director general de algún ministerio o algo por el estilo, porque, créame, no se conformará con menos, un hombre como el barón Innstetten no puede vivir en una casa vulgar, en una barraca, y perdóneme, señora, porque es lo que es la casa del gobernador. Entonces decide adornarlo un poco. Una casa con un fantasma nunca es una casa vulgar… Eso por una parte.

—¿Por una parte? Por Dios, ¿es que aún hay algo más?

—Sí.

—Muy bien, soy toda oídos. Pero, a ser posible, que sea algo agradable.

—No estoy muy seguro de ello. Se trata de algo muy delicado, incluso atrevido, sobre todo para ser dicho delante de alguien como usted, señora mía.

—Eso despierta aún más mi curiosidad.

—Muy bien, pues. Innstetten, aparte de su imperiosa necesidad de medrar a toda costa, recurriendo si es preciso a la ayuda de su propio fantasma, tiene otra pasión: actúa siempre como un educador. Es un pedagogo nato, y de hecho no hubiera desentonado en absoluto con Basedow a su izquierda y Pestalozzi a su derecha, aunque más religioso que ambos, en los correccionales de Schnepfenthal o Bunzlau.

—¿Y también quiere educarme a mí? ¿Educarme mediante un fantasma?

—Tal vez «educar» no sea la palabra. Más bien educar de una forma indirecta.

—No le comprendo.

—Una mujer joven es una mujer joven, y un gobernador es un gobernador. Él tiene que viajar a menudo por la región y la casa se queda sola y desamparada. Un fantasma es como un querubín con la espada…

—Oh, ya hemos salido del bosque —dijo Effi—. Ahí está el molino de Utpatel. Ya sólo nos queda pasar junto al cementerio.

Poco después cabalgaban por la pequeña hondonada que separaba el cementerio y la parcela con el enrejado. Effi dirigió la mirada hacia la lápida y el pino, donde yacía enterrado el chino.

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Eran las dos cuando llegaron a la casa. Crampas se despidió y prosiguió su camino hacia el interior de la ciudad, cabalgando hasta detenerse delante de su residencia en la plaza del mercado. Por su parte, Effi se cambió de ropa e intentó dormir, pero no lo consiguió, pues su irritación era aún mayor que su cansancio. El hecho de que Innstetten cultivase una historia de fantasmas para que la suya no fuera una casa vulgar era hasta cierto punto comprensible, encajaba con su inclinación a distinguirse de la muchedumbre; pero lo otro, utilizar un espectro como instrumento educativo, no dejaba de ser indignante, casi ofensivo. Y la expresión «instrumento educativo» tan sólo reflejaba una pequeña parte de todo el asunto; lo que Crampas había querido decir en realidad era mucho más, era como una especie de calculado instrumento intimidatorio, que revelaba una absoluta falta de buen corazón y casi rayaba en la crueldad. La sangre se le subió a la cabeza, cerró su pequeño puño y empezó a trazar planes, pero de repente se echó a reír. «¡Pero qué criatura soy! ¿Quién me asegura que Crampas tenga razón? Crampas es divertido por su lengua maliciosa, pero no hay que tomarle en serio, no es más que un fanfarrón que no le llega a Innstetten ni a la suela de los zapatos».

En ese instante apareció en la calle el coche de Innstetten, que ese día regresaba más temprano de lo habitual. Effi corrió al vestíbulo para recibirle y se mostró más efusiva que otras veces, como si en cierto modo tuviera la necesidad de desagraviarlo. Pero no conseguía olvidar del todo las palabras de Crampas, y en medio de todas sus lisonjas, y mientras aparentaba escuchar con interés, no dejaba de repetirse en su interior: «Así que un fantasma muy bien calculado, ¿eh? ¡Un fantasma para mantenerme a raya!». Sin embargo, al final logró alejar aquella idea y escuchó con aire relajado lo que él le explicaba.

Entretanto habían llegado ya a mediados de noviembre, y el viento del noroeste, que había crecido en intensidad hasta convertirse en vendaval, estuvo azotando durante un día y medio contra los espigones con tanta violencia que el Kessine, cada vez más crecido por el reflujo, desbordó el baluarte e inundó las calles de la ciudad. Pero una vez que hubo desfogado su furia, el temporal amainó y vinieron aún unos cuantos días soleados de otoño tardío. «¡Quién sabe cuánto durarán!», le dijo Effi a Crampas, y decidieron volver a salir a caballo a la mañana del día siguiente. También Innstetten, que tenía la jornada libre, quiso participar en la excursión. Se proponían ir primero hasta el espigón, donde desmontarían para pasear un poco por la playa, y después hacer un pequeño refrigerio al abrigo de las dunas, donde no soplaba el viento.

A la hora convenida, Crampas se presentó con su caballo ante la casa del gobernador; Kruse ya tenía a punto la montura de la señora, quien apareció enseguida y, mientras se encaramaba a la silla, excusó a su marido por no poder acompañarles: la noche anterior se había vuelto a declarar un gran incendio en Morgenitz —el tercero en tres semanas, al parecer intencionado—, e Innstetten había tenido que acudir muy a su pesar, ya que estaba francamente ilusionado con aquella excursión, que podría muy bien ser la última del otoño.

Crampas dijo que lo lamentaba mucho, tal vez sólo por decir algo, o quizá porque lo sentía sinceramente, pues aunque no tenía escrúpulos en lo que respectaba a aventuras de amor caballerescas, no dejaba de ser un buen camarada. Todo ello, por supuesto, de manera muy superficial. Ayudar a un amigo y engañarle a los cinco minutos eran cosas perfectamente compatibles con su concepto del honor. Hacía ambas cosas con increíble bonhomía.

Como de costumbre, la comitiva atravesó la plantación. Rollo iba al frente, seguido de Effi y Crampas, y Kruse cerraba la marcha. Knut no venía esta vez.

—¿Dónde ha dejado a Knut?

—Tiene paperas.

—Qué curioso… —dijo Effi, riendo—. De hecho, da la impresión de tenerlas siempre.

—Muy cierto. ¡Pero tendría usted que verle ahora! Aunque será mejor que no lo haga. Las paperas se contagian sólo con mirarlas.

—No me lo creo.

—Hay muchas cosas que las jóvenes señoras no se creen.

—Y en cambio se creen otras muchas que sería mejor que no creyeran.

—¿Lo dice por mí?

—No.

—Lástima.

—Ese «lástima» es muy típico de usted. Estoy convencida, comandante, de que encontraría muy natural que le hiciese una declaración de amor.

—No pretendo llegar a tanto. Pero no creo que haya un hombre en el mundo que no deseara algo así. Los pensamientos y los deseos son libres.

—Eso es muy discutible. Y, en cualquier caso, existe una gran diferencia entre pensamientos y deseos. Por lo general, los pensamientos suelen mantenerse en lo más hondo, pero los deseos casi siempre afloran a los labios.

—¡No me haga precisamente esa comparación…!

—Ah, Crampas, es usted… Es usted…

—Un loco.

—No. Ya está exagerando otra vez. Usted es algo diferente. En Hohen-Cremmen solíamos decir que no hay nadie tan vanidoso como un alférez de húsares de dieciocho años…

—¿Y ahora?

—Ahora digo que no hay nadie tan vanidoso como un comandante de la milicia territorial de cuarenta y dos años.

—Y con los dos años que tan graciosamente me acaba de quitar queda todo arreglado. Le beso la mano.

—Sí, «le beso la mano». Ese es el tipo de frase que mejor le va. Es muy vienesa. Y tuve ocasión de conocer a los vieneses hace cuatro años en Karlsbad, donde me hacían la corte a mí, una criaturita de catorce abriles. ¡Lo que tuve que escuchar allí…!

—Nada que no se mereciera, estoy seguro de ello.

—Si así fuera, lo que debería halagarme resulta bastante indecoroso… Pero mire allí las boyas, cómo flotan y danzan con las banderolas rojas desplegadas. Este verano, en las pocas ocasiones en que me aventuré a venir hasta la playa, me decía al verlas: «Allí abajo debe de estar la ciudad de Vineta, seguro que está allí, esas son las puntas de los campanarios…».

—Eso es porque conoce el poema de Heine.

—¿Cuál?

—El de Vineta.

—Pues no, no lo conozco. De hecho, desconozco bastantes cosas. Desgraciadamente.

—¡Y eso que cuenta con Gieshübler y su círculo periodístico! Pero creo que Heine le puso un título distinto al poema, «El espectro del mar» o algo parecido. De todos modos, se refería sin duda a Vineta. Y él también, y permítame que le explique por encima el contenido del poema, me refiero al poeta, cuando pasa por este lugar, desde su hamaca en la cubierta de un barco, mira al mar y ve en el fondo estrechas callejas medievales, y damas encapuchadas que, con sus libros de rezos en la mano, se dirigen hacia la iglesia mientras resuenan todas las campanas. Y, al oírlas, el poeta se siente invadido por el deseo de acudir también a la iglesia, aunque sólo sea para ver de cerca aquellas capuchas, y ese anhelo le arranca un grito e intenta arrojarse por la borda. Pero en ese mismo instante el capitán le agarra por una pierna y le dice: «Doctor, ¿es que se ha vuelto loco?».

—Es precioso. Me gustaría leerlo. ¿Es muy largo?

—No, de hecho es bastante corto, tal vez algo más largo que «Tienes diamantes y perlas» o «Tus suaves dedos de azucena». —Y, al decir esto, acarició suavemente la mano de ella—. Pero, corto o largo, ¡qué fuerza descriptiva, qué expresividad! Es mi poeta favorito y me conozco su obra de memoria, aunque en general, y pese a mis ocasionales y sacrílegas incursiones, la poesía no suele decirme gran cosa. Pero Heine es diferente: todo en él es vida, y sobre todo comprende el amor, que al fin y al cabo es lo que de verdad importa. Y a este respecto no tiene una visión unilateral…

—¿Qué quiere decir?

—Quiero decir que no sólo se centra en el amor.

—Bueno, si así fuera no me parecería algo tan malo. ¿Qué otros temas aborda?

—Trata sobre todo lo romántico, que es lo que va detrás del amor, y que según algunos no pueden

separarse. Pero yo no estoy de acuerdo, porque sus últimos poemas, que también se han dado en llamar «románticos», o más bien fue él quien los calificó así, están llenos de ejecuciones, en muchos casos por amor, es cierto. Pero también muy a menudo por motivos más burdos, entre ellos, principalmente, la política, que casi siempre es burda. En una de estas romanzas, por ejemplo, Carlos Estuardo lleva su propia cabeza bajo el brazo, y mucho más truculenta todavía es la historia de Vitzliputzli…

—¿De quién?

—De Vitzliputzli, un dios mexicano. Cuando los mexicanos cogían prisioneros a veinte o treinta españoles, estos tenían que ser sacrificados al dios Vitzliputzli. Era simplemente una costumbre del país, un ritual que se hacía en un abrir y cerrar de ojos: se abría el vientre, se arrancaba el corazón…

—No, Crampas, no continúe. Es indecente y repugnante. Y precisamente ahora, que nos disponíamos a desayunar.

—A mí estas cosas no me afectan en absoluto, y mi apetito depende exclusivamente del menú.

Mientras hablaban de todo esto, habían llegado, tal como estaba previsto en el programa, a un lugar de la playa retirado y al abrigo de las dunas, con un banco y una mesa de aspecto muy primitivo formada por dos postes y un tablero encima. Kruse, que se había adelantado, ya lo había dispuesto todo: panecillos y lonchas de asado frío, vino tinto y, al lado de la botella, dos hermosas y delicadas copas con un bisel dorado, como las que se compran en los balnearios o se traen como recuerdo de las fábricas de vidrio.

Desmontaron. Kruse, que había atado su caballo al tronco de un decrépito pino, cogió a los otros dos animales por las riendas para amarrarlos también, mientras Crampas y Effi se sentaban a la mesa ya servida, desde donde podían divisar la playa y el espigón a través de un angosto pasaje entre las dunas.

Aún revuelto por los días de galerna, el mar se encrespaba en olas altas, y el sol casi invernal de noviembre vertía su pálida luz sobre el paisaje. De vez en cuando, un golpe de viento hacía llegar la espuma muy cerca de donde se encontraban. A su alrededor se veían matas de barrón, entre las que destacaba el amarillo claro de las siemprevivas, pese a la similitud con el color de la arena de la playa. Effi hacía los honores.

—Siento mucho, comandante, tener que ofrecerle estos panecillos sobre la tapa de esta cesta.

—Lo que importa es quien los ofrece.

—En fin, ha sido idea de Kruse. Ah, Rollo, tú también estás aquí. Creo que no habíamos contado contigo para las provisiones. ¿Qué vamos a hacer contigo, Rollo?

—Pienso que debiéramos dárselo todo. Yo le cedo gustoso mi parte, aunque no sea más que por gratitud. Porque verá, mi muy querida Effi…

Effi le miró.

—… porque verá, señora, Rollo me recuerda lo que le quería explicar a continuación, o como complemento, de la historia de Vitzliputzli. Es más picante, porque se trata de una historia amorosa. ¿Ha oído usted hablar alguna vez de un tal Pedro el Cruel?

—Vagamente.

—Era una especie de Barbazul.

—Ah, muy bien. Siempre es interesante oír hablar de un personaje así. Y todavía me acuerdo de que siempre decíamos que mi amiga Hulda Niemeyer, a quien ya conoce de nombre, no sabía nada de historia salvo lo de las seis mujeres de Enrique VIII, el Barbazul inglés, si es que la palabra no se queda corta para referirse a él. Y se conocía de memoria a las seis. Tendría que haberla oído pronunciar sus nombres, sobre todo el de la madre de la reina Isabel, tan terriblemente consternada como si después le llegara a ella el turno… Pero, por favor, cuénteme esa historia de don Pedro…

—Pues bien, en la corte de don Pedro había un caballero español, moreno y muy apuesto, que llevaba siempre al pecho la Cruz de Calatrava, que sería como el Águila Negra y el *Pour le mérite* juntos. Aquella cruz formaba parte de su persona, tenía que llevarla siempre, y el caballero de Calatrava, quien como es natural mantenía una aventura en secreto con la reina…

—¿Y por qué es natural?

—Porque estamos en España.

—Ah.

—Pues como iba diciendo, este caballero de Calatrava tenía un perro magnífico, un terranova, aunque por aquella época aún no se conocían, ya que esto ocurrió unos cien años antes del descubrimiento de América. Un perro magnífico, una especie de Rollo…

Al oír su nombre, Rollo ladró meneando la cola.

—Fue pasando el tiempo y aquel amor secreto, que ya no lo era tanto, empezó a hacérsele insufrible al rey, y como tampoco soportaba a aquel apuesto caballero (porque, aparte de cruel, el rey era un canalla

celoso, o si la expresión resulta demasiado ofensiva para un rey, y más aún para mi gentil oyente, digamos que estaba consumido por la envidia), decidió ejecutarlo a traición como castigo por su secreto amor.

—No se lo reprocho.

—No estoy tan seguro, señora. Espere a escuchar lo que ocurrió después. Hasta cierto punto es comprensible, pero en mi opinión el rey fue demasiado lejos. Simuló organizar un gran banquete en honor del caballero por sus heroicas hazañas, y dispuso una larga mesa a la que invitó a todos los grandes del reino. El rey ocupó el puesto central, y el asiento de enfrente estaba destinado a aquel para quien se celebraba la fiesta, es decir, el caballero de Calatrava al que se homenajeaba aquel día. Y como este, a pesar de que se le estuvo esperando durante un buen rato, no se presentó, tuvieron que comenzar la celebración sin él y sólo quedó un asiento libre… un asiento libre justo delante del rey.

—¿Y qué ocurrió después?

—Pues imagínese, señora, que en el preciso momento en que el rey Pedro se disponía a levantarse para expresar hipócritamente su pesar por la ausencia de su «querido invitado», se oyeron en la escalera los gritos horrorizados de los criados, y antes de que nadie supiera qué estaba ocurriendo, algo pasó corriendo a toda velocidad junto a la larga mesa, se plantó delante de la silla vacía y colocó sobre el asiento una cabeza decapitada. Y allí estaba Rollo, mirando fijamente por encima de la cabeza a la persona que tenía delante: el rey. Rollo había acompañado a su amo en su último viaje, y en cuanto cayó el hacha del verdugo salió corriendo con la cabeza, y ahora estaba allí, plantado ante la larga mesa del banquete, acusando al rey asesino.

Effi se quedó muy callada. Finalmente dijo:

—Crampas, en su estilo, se trata de una historia muy hermosa, y por eso se lo perdono. Pero preferiría, y también le agradecería, que me contara otra clase de historias. Incluso de Heine. No creo que sólo escribiera sobre Vitzliputzli y sobre don Pedro y «su» Rollo… porque el mío nunca hubiese hecho nada semejante. ¡Ven, Rollo! Pobre animal, ahora ya no puedo mirarte sin pensar en aquel caballero de Calatrava al que la reina amaba en secreto… Por favor, haga venir a Kruse y dígale que guarde todo esto en las alforjas. Y durante el camino de vuelta, tiene usted que contarme otra historia, algo totalmente distinto.

Kruse se acercó, pero cuando se disponía a retirar las copas, Crampas le dijo:

—Esa copa, esa de ahí, no la toque. Yo me la llevaré.

—Como usted ordene, señor comandante.

Effi, que lo había escuchado, sacudió la cabeza. Luego rompió a reír.

—Pero, Crampas, ¿cómo se le ocurre hacer algo así? Kruse es lo bastante necio como para no darle muchas vueltas a eso, y si lo hace, por suerte no llegaría a gran cosa. Pero eso no le da a derecho a coger esa copa, una copa que cuesta treinta peniques de la fábrica Josephine…

—El hecho de que se burle así de su precio la hace aún más valiosa para mí.

—Ah, nunca cambiará. Tiene mucho sentido del humor, pero un sentido del humor muy peculiar. Si le estoy entendiendo bien, lo que pretende usted, y es tan ridículo que casi me avergüenza decirlo, lo que pretende es hacer como el rey de Thule del *Fausto* mucho antes de tiempo.

Crampas asintió con una pícara sonrisa.

—Bueno, como quiera. Allá cada uno con lo que hace, usted sabrá el papel que le conviene. Pero déjeme decirle que la parte que me reserva a mí en esta historia es muy poco halagüeña. No me gustaría acabar como la amante, la *Buhle*, que rima con el rey de Thule. Quédese con la copa, pero le ruego que no saque ninguna conclusión que pueda comprometerme. Se lo contaré a Innstetten.

—No lo hará, mi querida señora.

—¿Por qué no?

—Innstetten no es un hombre que vea estas cosas del modo en que deben verse.

Ella le miró fijamente con dureza. Pero luego bajó los ojos, desconcertada y casi turbada.

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Effi estaba descontenta de sí misma, y se alegró de que se decidiera suspender aquellas excursiones mientras durase el invierno. Cada vez que pensaba en todo lo que se había hablado, tratado o insinuado a lo largo de tantos días y semanas, no encontraba nada que pudiera reprocharse directamente. Crampas era un hombre ingenioso, mundano y divertido, un hombre libre, también en el buen sentido de la palabra, y hubiera sido bajo y mezquino comportarse con él en todo momento de forma mojigata, manteniendo estrictamente las normas del decoro social. No, ella nada tenía que reprocharse por haberle seguido la corriente, y aun así tenía la vaga sensación de haber vencido un peligro y celebraba que todo aquello hubiera quedado atrás. En adelante no podrían seguir manteniendo con tanta frecuencia aquel trato casi familiar, algo prácticamente imposible dadas las circunstancias domésticas de Crampas, y los encuentros en las casas de las familias nobles de la región, inevitables durante el invierno, resultarían por fuerza escasos y breves. A medida que pensaba en todo esto, Effi iba recuperando la calma, y descubrió con satisfacción que, en definitiva, no le supondría un gran esfuerzo renunciar a la agradable compañía del comandante. Además, su sensación de seguridad y bienestar aumentó cuando Innstetten le comunicó que ese invierno no tendría que hacer sus habituales viajes a Varzin, ya que el príncipe iría a Friedrichsruh, lugar por el que parecía mostrar cada vez mayor predilección. Por un lado lo lamentaba, pero por otro se alegraba, ya que eso le permitiría consagrarse de lleno a su hogar, y, si a Effi le parecía bien, podrían repasar su viaje a Italia, releyendo y comentando las notas que él había tomado. Una recapitulación como aquella resultaba esencial, porque era la única manera de rememorar y asimilar realmente para siempre todas las cosas que habían visto de forma muy superficial y que apenas eran conscientes de que habían calado en el fondo de su alma, y gracias a aquel repaso en retrospectiva aflorarían a su conciencia y podrían hacerlas suyas. Siguió extendiéndose sobre el tema, y añadió que Gieshübler, quien conocía toda la «bota italiana» hasta Palermo, le había pedido que se le permitiese participar en las sesiones. Effi, que hubiese preferido de largo una velada de conversación normal sin «bota italiana» —se pensaba incluso en hacer circular fotografías—, asintió no sin cierto esfuerzo. Su reticencia pasó inadvertida para Innstetten, quien, totalmente entusiasmado con el proyecto, continuó:

—Por supuesto que no estará sólo Gieshübler, sino que también estarán presentes Roswitha y Annie, y cuando pienso en que ambos volveremos a surcar el Gran Canal, oyendo cantar a lo lejos a los gondoleros mientras a sólo unos pasos de nosotros Roswitha se inclina sobre la pequeña Annie para cantarle a su manera «Buhküken von Halberstadt» o algo por el estilo, pienso que pueden ser unas veladas invernales deliciosas, y tú estarás ahí sentada a mi lado, tejiéndome una gran bufanda de lana. ¿Qué te parece todo esto, Effi?

Estas veladas no se quedaron en un simple proyecto, sino que comenzaron a celebrarse y muy probablemente hubieran proseguido durante varias semanas si el inocente y cándido Gieshübler, pese a su aversión por toda clase de doble juego, no se hubiese encontrado dividido entre dos amos. Uno era Innstetten, el otro era Crampas. Y así como aceptaba con mucho gusto las invitaciones de Innstetten a sus reuniones italianas, aunque no fuera más que por Effi, recibió aún con mayor placer la idea de participar en el proyecto de Crampas, que consistía en la representación para antes de Navidad de la obra *Un paso en falso*. Así que, poco antes de comenzar la tercera velada, Gieshübler aprovechó la ocasión para hablarle a Effi acerca de ello, y le comentó que le habían reservado el papel de Ella.

Effi se quedó como electrizada. ¿Qué importancia podían tener Padua o Vicenza al lado de aquello? A Effi no le gustaba lo recalentado, ella deseaba cosas frescas, variedad. Pero como si una voz en su interior le gritara «¡Cuidado…!», preguntó en medio de su alegre agitación:

—¿Es el comandante quien ha propuesto el plan?

—Sí. Como ya sabe, señora, fue elegido por unanimidad para el comité de actividades recreativas. Por fin podremos disfrutar de un agradable invierno en el casino. Es el hombre idóneo para estos casos.

—¿Y él también actuará?

—No. Ha renunciado a ello, y tengo que añadir que es una lástima, porque él es muy bueno en todo y habría sido un excelente Arthur von Schmettwitz. Sólo se encargará de la dirección.

—Peor todavía.

—¿Peor todavía? —repitió Gieshübler.

—Oh, no se lo tome al pie de la letra; sólo es un modo de hablar, que en realidad quiere decir todo lo contrario. Sin embargo, lo cierto es que el comandante es un poco autoritario, siempre quiere imponer sus ideas prescindiendo de la opinión de los demás, y todo se ha de hacer como él quiere, y no como tú querrías.

Y así continuó hablando y enredándose cada vez más en contradicciones.

La representación de *Un paso en falso* tuvo en efecto lugar, y precisamente porque sólo disponían de quince días para prepararla (no se podía contar con la semana anterior a Navidad), todos hicieron un gran esfuerzo y el resultado fue magnífico. Todos los actores, y especialmente Effi, cosecharon abundantes aplausos. Crampas se había limitado a dirigir, y aunque durante los ensayos había sido muy riguroso con el resto del reparto, fue bastante permisivo con la actuación de Effi, ya fuera porque Gieshübler le había puesto al corriente de la conversación mantenida con ella, o porque se había dado cuenta por sí solo de que Effi no estaba dispuesta a seguir sus instrucciones. Era lo suficientemente inteligente y conocía muy bien a las mujeres para no interferir en el curso natural de los acontecimientos que, por experiencia propia, también conocía muy bien.

La noche de la función Innstetten y Effi salieron tarde del casino, y ya era más de medianoche cuando llegaron a casa. Johanna les esperaba despierta por si la necesitaban, e Innstetten, que estaba no poco orgulloso de su joven esposa, le contó a la doncella lo encantadora que había estado la señora y lo bien que había actuado. Era una lástima no haberlo pensado antes, ya que Christel, Johanna misma, e incluso esa vieja urraca de la señora Kruse, podrían haber asistido desde la galería de la orquesta, como había hecho otra mucha gente. Johanna se retiró, y Effi, que estaba rendida, se acostó. Pero Innstetten, que aún tenía ganas de seguir hablando, acercó un sillón y se sentó junto a la cama de su esposa, mirándola amorosamente y cogiéndole una mano entre las suyas.

—Sí, Effi, ha sido una velada magnífica. Me he divertido mucho con la obra, que está francamente bien. Nadie diría que el autor es un magistrado real, y además de Königsberg. Pero lo que más me ha gustado ha sido mi pequeña y encantadora esposa, que ha cautivado a todo el mundo.

—Oh, Geert, no digas esas cosas, que ya estoy bastante envanecida…

—¡Bastante envanecida…! Tal vez, pero no tanto como otras. Y eso, aparte de tus siete bellezas…

—Todos tenemos las siete bellezas.

—No me he expresado bien. En tu caso, habría que multiplicarlas por siete.

—¡Qué galante estás, Geert! Si no te conociera, me asustaría. ¿O es que hay algo más detrás de todo esto?

—¿Acaso tienes algún remordimiento de conciencia? ¿Has estado escuchando detrás de las puertas?

—Oh, Geert, ahora sí que me estás asustando. —Se incorporó en la cama y miró a su marido fijamente —. ¿Quieres que llame a Johanna para que nos traiga té? Te gusta tomarlo antes de acostarte.

Él le besó la mano.

—No, Effi. Después de medianoche, ni siquiera al káiser le está permitido pedir una taza de té, y ya sabes que no me gusta abusar de la gente que está a mi servicio. No, no quiero nada más que mirarte y alegrarme de tenerte a mi lado. En ocasiones, uno se da cuenta con más intensidad del tesoro que tiene. A fin de cuentas, también podrías haber sido como la señora Crampas; es una mujer horrible, que no se muestra amable con nadie y que de muy buena gana te hubiese hecho desaparecer de la faz de la tierra.

—Oh, Geert, por favor, eso son figuraciones tuyas. ¡Pobre mujer! Yo no he observado nada.

—Porque no te fijas en esas cosas. Pero es tal como te lo digo, y por esa razón el pobre Crampas estaba de lo más cohibido, te evitaba y apenas se atrevía a mirarte, lo cual no es muy propio de él, siendo como es tan mujeriego, y sobre todo con señoras como tú, que son su particular pasión. Y estoy seguro de que nadie sabe eso mejor que mi querida mujercita. No hay más que ver la diferencia entre su actitud durante la velada de hoy y la de alegre parloteo, y perdona la expresión, que adoptaba cuando venía por las mañanas a nuestro mirador, o cuando cabalgábamos por la playa o paseábamos por el espigón. Es tal como te lo digo: hoy no se ha atrevido porque tenía miedo de su mujer. Y no se le puede culpar. La mujer del comandante es un poco como nuestra señora Kruse, y si tuviera que elegir entre las dos, no sé a cuál

escogería.

—Yo sí que lo sé. Existe una gran diferencia entre ambas, y es que la mujer del comandante es una pobre desdichada y la Kruse es tétrica.

—Y en el caso de escoger, ¿te quedarías con la desdichada?

—Sin ninguna duda.

—Bueno, eso es cuestión de gustos. Se nota que no has sido nunca infeliz. Por lo demás, Crampas posee un talento especial para librarse de su pobre esposa. Siempre encuentra algún pretexto para dejarla en casa.

—Pues hoy estaba allí.

—Sí, hoy sí. No tenía más remedio. Pero hemos quedado en hacer una excursión el tercer día de fiestas para ir a ver a Ring, el guardabosques jefe, con él, Gieshübler y el pastor, y tendrías que haber visto la habilidad con que nos dio a entender que su esposa debía quedarse en casa.

—Entonces, ¿sólo irán caballeros?

—¡De ningún modo! En ese caso, yo tampoco habría aceptado. También vendrás tú y dos o tres señoras más, sin contar las de las fincas.

—Pues entonces es algo muy feo por su parte, quiero decir por parte de Crampas, y una cosa así es siempre merecedora de castigo.

—Sí, a veces pasa. Pero creo que a nuestro amigo no le quita el sueño pensar en las consecuencias de sus actos.

—¿Consideras que es una mala persona?

—No, mala persona no. Más bien al contrario, y, en cualquier caso, tiene sus cosas buenas. Pero él es así, como medio polaco, no te puedes fiar de él en nada, y menos aún en cuestión de mujeres. Es un jugador. No juega en las mesas, pero lo arriesga todo en la vida, y no puedes perderle de vista las manos.

—Me alegro de que me lo digas. Tendré que ir con cuidado con él.

—Sí, hazlo. Pero sin excederte, porque entonces no serviría de nada. Más vale comportarse con naturalidad, y desde luego lo mejor es mostrar carácter y firmeza, y, si me permites emplear una expresión algo petulante, un alma pura.

Ella le miró con los ojos muy abiertos. Luego dijo:

—Sí, desde luego. Pero ahora deja de hablar, o al menos no hables de cosas que no me complacen. ¿Sabes una cosa? Me parece que vuelvo a oír bailar ahí arriba. Es extraño que siga repitiéndose. Creía que no era más que una especie de broma tuya.

—Yo no diría tanto, Effi. Pero, sea lo que sea, cada cual debe estar a bien con su conciencia para no tener nada que temer.

Effi asintió con la cabeza, y de pronto recordó las palabras que Crampas le había dicho acerca de su esposo como «educador».

Llegó la Nochebuena, y transcurrió de idéntico modo que el año anterior. De Hohen-Cremmen llegaron regalos y cartas, no faltaron los elogiosos versos de felicitación de Gieshübler, y el primo Briest envió una tarjeta: un paisaje nevado con postes telegráficos y, sobre los hilos, un pajarillo acurrucado. También dispusieron un árbol navideño para la pequeña Annie, quien alargaba sus manitas para intentar coger las luces. Innstetten, alegre y relajado, parecía disfrutar de su felicidad hogareña y se mostró pródigo en atenciones a la niña. Roswitha estaba sorprendida de ver al señor tan cariñoso y de tan buen humor. También Effi hablaba y reía mucho, pero no era algo que le saliese del fondo del alma. Se sentía deprimida y no sabía a quién culpar de ello, si a Innstetten o a sí misma. No había llegado ninguna felicitación de Crampas, y Effi no sabía si alegrarse o no de ello: sus atenciones la llenaban de cierta aprensión, pero su indiferencia también la desazonaba, y se daba cuenta de que las cosas no iban como deberían.

—Te veo intranquila —dijo Innstetten al cabo de un rato.

—Sí. Todo el mundo ha sido tan amable conmigo, sobre todo tú; pero eso me deprime, porque siento como si no lo mereciera.

—No debes torturarte por eso. A fin de cuentas, todo el mundo obtiene lo que se merece.

Effi escuchó aquello muy atentamente, y su mala conciencia le hizo preguntarse si no lo habría dicho intencionadamente con un doble sentido.

Avanzada la tarde llegó el pastor Lindequist para felicitarles, y también para preguntar sobre la proyectada excursión a la casa del guardabosques jefe en Uvagla, que naturalmente habría de realizarse en trineo. Crampas le había ofrecido un sitio en el suyo, pero como ni el comandante ni su criado, quien como hombre para todo ejercería en esa ocasión de cochero, sabían bien el camino, sería conveniente hacerlo

juntos, con el trineo del gobernador al frente seguido por el de Crampas. Quizá también debería seguirles el trineo de Gieshübler, ya que el conocimiento del recorrido por parte de Mirambo, de quien inexplicablemente el amigo Alonzo, por lo demás tan prudente, pensaba fiarse, probablemente era peor aún que el del pecoso ulano de Treptow. Innstetten, a quien divertían todas estas pequeñas precauciones, se mostró de acuerdo con la propuesta del pastor Lindequist, y dispuso que quedaran todos a las dos en punto en la plaza del mercado, donde él se pondría al frente de la expedición.

De acuerdo al plan convenido, Innstetten entró puntualmente a las dos en la plaza del mercado. Allí esperaba ya Crampas, quien desde su trineo saludó en primer lugar a Effi, para seguidamente colocarse detrás del de Innstetten. Junto al comandante iba sentado el pastor, y a continuación les seguía el trineo de Gieshübler, a quien acompañaba el doctor Hannemann. El primero llevaba un elegante abrigo de piel de búfalo ribeteado de marta, y el segundo una pelliza de oso que visiblemente contaba con más de treinta años de servicio. En su juventud Hannemann había ejercido como cirujano en un barco que hacía la travesía a Groenlandia. Mirambo iba sentado delante, y se le veía un tanto nervioso a causa de su inexperiencia como cochero, tal como Lindequist había sospechado.

Al cabo de dos minutos dejaban atrás el molino de Utpatel.

Entre Kessin y Uvagla (donde, según la leyenda, se erigía antiguamente un templo sorbio), se extendía una franja de bosque de sólo unos mil pasos de ancho pero de aproximadamente unos ocho kilómetros de largo, a cuya derecha se extendía el mar y a la izquierda, hasta perderse en el horizonte, una zona de tierras muy fértiles y bien cultivadas. Los tres trineos surcaban a toda velocidad aquella gran extensión de tierra, precedidos a cierta distancia por un par de viejos carruajes en los que con toda probabilidad viajaban otros invitados a la casa del guardabosques jefe. Uno de ellos, fácilmente reconocible por sus ruedas altas y anticuadas, era sin duda el de Papenhagen. Güldenklee estaba considerado el mejor orador del distrito (mejor aún que Borcke, e incluso que Grasenabb), y no podía faltar a ninguna celebración.

La caravana avanzaba muy deprisa. Los cocheros de los señores se esforzaban también para no dejarse adelantar por los trineos, de modo que a las tres en punto paraban ya ante la casa del guardabosques jefe. Ring, un imponente señor de algo más de cincuenta años y aspecto marcial, que había tomado parte en la primera campaña de Schleswig a las órdenes de Wrangel y Bonin y que se había distinguido en el asalto y toma del Danewerk, estaba en la puerta recibiendo a sus invitados, quienes, tras quitarse los abrigos y saludar a la señora de la casa, se sentaron a una larga mesa dispuesta ya con el café y pirámides de pastas artísticamente colocadas. La señora Ring, una mujer bastante apocada o cuando menos tímida, se mostraba bastante cohibida en su papel de anfitriona, lo cual contrariaba visiblemente al guardabosques jefe, hombre amante del aplomo y la ostentación. Por fortuna, su mal humor no llegó a estallar, pues todo lo que le faltaba a su esposa lo tenían con creces sus hijas, unas lindas y encantadoras muchachas de catorce y trece años, que habían salido enteramente a su padre. Sobre todo la mayor, Cora, que enseguida comenzó a coquetear con Innstetten y Crampas, y ambos le siguieron el juego. A Effi aquello la molestó, pero luego se avergonzó de haberse molestado. Estaba sentada junto a Sidonie von Grasenabb, y le dijo:

—Es curioso, yo también era así cuando tenía catorce años.

Effi esperaba que Sidonie la contradijera o, cuando menos, pusiera alguna objeción. Pero, en lugar de eso, contestó:

—Ya me lo imagino.

—¡Y cómo las consiente el padre…! —añadió Effi, por decir algo que disimulara su turbación.

Sidonie asintió con la cabeza.

—Ese es el problema: no hay disciplina. Es el signo de nuestros tiempos.

Effi no dijo nada.

Después de tomar el café, se levantaron de la mesa para dar un pequeño paseo de media hora por el bosque circundante. Se dirigieron primero a un recinto donde tenían encerrados algunos animales de caza. Cora abrió la verja y, en cuanto entró, se le acercaron unos ciervos. Era una escena encantadora, como de cuento de hadas. Pero la presunción de la joven criatura, consciente de la estampa que representaba, enturbiaba la pureza de la impresión que transmitía, al menos a ojos de Effi. «No —se dijo para sí—, yo nunca fui tan vanidosa. Tal vez me faltara un poco de disciplina, como me dio a entender hace un momento esa horrible Sidonie. En casa eran excesivamente condescendientes conmigo; me querían demasiado. Lo que sí puedo decir bien alto es que nunca mostré tanta afectación. Eso era cosa de Hulda. Por eso seguía sin gustarme cuando volví a verla este verano».

Cuando regresaban del bosque hacia la casa, empezó a nevar. Crampas se acercó a Effi y le dijo que lamentaba no haber tenido ocasión de saludarla antes, y, señalando los abultados copos que caían, añadió:

—Si sigue así, nos quedaremos bloqueados por la nieve.

—Eso no sería tan malo. Desde que era una niña, la idea de quedarme aislada por la nieve siempre me ha evocado una imagen agradable, una sensación de amparo y protección.

—Eso resulta totalmente nuevo para mí, querida señora.

—Sí —continuó Effi, intentando reír—, las ideas son algo muy singular, no sólo proceden de tus vivencias personales, sino también de las cosas que has oído en alguna parte o de las que te has enterado por casualidad. Es usted muy leído, comandante, pero hay un poema, que desde luego no es de Heine ni tiene nada que ver con «Espectro del mar» ni «Vitzliputzli», del que creo haber tenido conocimiento antes que usted. Se titula «La muralla de Dios», y me lo sé de memoria; me lo enseñó nuestro pastor allí en Hohen-Cremmen hace ya muchos años, siendo yo muy niña.

—«La muralla de Dios». Un título muy bonito. ¿Y de qué trata?

—Es una pequeña historia, muy breve. Hubo una vez una guerra en algún lugar, y cuando llegó la campaña de invierno una anciana viuda, aterrada ante el avance enemigo, le pidió a Dios que levantase «una muralla a su alrededor» para protegerla de los atacantes extranjeros. Entonces Dios hizo que cayese una nevada que cubrió por completo la casa y el enemigo pasó de largo.

Crampas se quedó visiblemente desconcertado y cambió de tema.

Al oscurecer, estaban todos de vuelta en la casa del guardabosques jefe.

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A las siete se sentaron de nuevo a la mesa, y la alegría fue general en el momento de volver a encender el árbol de Navidad, un abeto adornado con innumerables bolas plateadas. Crampas, que no había estado antes en casa de los Ring, se quedó impresionado. El damasco, los refrigeradores de vino, la rica vajilla de plata, todo ofrecía una imagen de gran distinción, muy por encima del nivel que podía esperarse de un guardabosques, lo cual se explicaba porque la señora Ring, pese a lo que pudiera pensarse por su timidez y apocamiento, pertenecía a una adinerada familia de Danzig de comerciantes de grano. De esa ciudad provenían también la mayoría de los cuadros que colgaban de las paredes: el comerciante de grano con su esposa, el refectorio de Marienburg, y una excelente copia del famoso retablo de la iglesia de Nuestra Señora de Danzig pintado por Memling. El monasterio de Oliva aparecía representado dos veces, en una pintura al óleo y en una talla de corcho. Sobre el aparador colgaba un retrato muy oscurecido por el tiempo del viejo Nettelbeck, procedente del modesto mobiliario del predecesor en el cargo del señor Ring, que había muerto hacía sólo un año y medio. Nadie había querido quedarse con aquel cuadro en la habitual subasta pública de las pertenencias del difunto, hasta que Innstetten, indignado ante tal menosprecio, hizo una oferta por él. Aquello pareció devolver el sentido patriótico a Ring, con lo que el viejo defensor de Kolberg se quedó finalmente en la jefatura forestal.

El retrato de Nettelbeck dejaba bastante que desear, pero el resto, como ya se ha mencionado, rayaba en la opulencia, y también la comida que se sirvió estuvo a la altura. Todos parecieron disfrutar en mayor o menor medida del ágape, excepto Sidonie. Estaba sentada entre Lindequist e Innstetten, y cuando vio aparecer de nuevo a Cora dijo:

—¡Otra vez esa insoportable chiquilla, esa Cora! Mírela, Innstetten, cómo sirve las copitas, con qué habilidad lo hace, si hasta podría trabajar de camarera. ¡Es intolerable! ¡Y qué miradas le lanza su amigo Crampas! ¿Qué semilla está sembrando? Dígame, ¿adónde vamos a ir a parar?

En el fondo Innstetten estaba de acuerdo con ella, pero encontró tan ofensivo y acerbo el tono de sus palabras que respondió sarcástico:

—¿Que adónde vamos a ir a parar? Yo tampoco lo sé, señorita.

Sidonie se dirigió entonces a su vecino de la izquierda.

—Dígame, pastor, ¿esa coquetuela de catorce años acude a su escuela?

—Sí, señorita.

—Pues permítame hacerle la observación de que no la ha conducido por el recto camino. Ya sé que eso no es sencillo hoy día, pero también sé que los encargados de velar por el cuidado de las almas de los jóvenes son a menudo poco estrictos. No cabe duda de que la mayor parte de la culpa es de los padres y los educadores.

Lindequist, adoptando el mismo tono que Innstetten, le respondió que tenía toda la razón, pero que el espíritu de la época ejercía un influjo demasiado poderoso.

—¡El espíritu de la época! —replicó Sidonie—. No me venga con esas historias. No puedo soportarlo, es la expresión de la debilidad más absoluta, una declaración de fracaso total. Ya me conozco todo eso, es un comodín para evitar toda intervención enérgica. Porque el recto camino del deber resulta siempre incómodo. Y se olvida demasiado fácilmente que del bien que se nos ha confiado también nos pedirán cuentas algún día. ¡Energía, querido pastor, disciplina! La carne es débil, ciertamente, pero…

En ese instante les trajeron un rosbif inglés, del que Sidonie se sirvió de forma copiosa sin reparar en la sonrisa de Lindequist. Y, al no percatarse de ello, no es extraño que continuase con toda naturalidad su interrumpida filípica:

—Por lo demás, todo lo que se está viendo aquí no podía haber sido de otra manera; es el mundo al revés, todo está trastocado desde la misma base. Ring, Ring… si no recuerdo mal, creo que fue en Suecia donde hubo antiguamente un legendario rey con ese nombre. Pues no me dirá que no se comporta como si

descendiese de aquel, y su madre, a la que yo llegué a conocer, era una planchadora de Köslin.

—No veo nada malo en ello.

—¿Nada malo? Yo tampoco. Y en todo caso, hay cosas peores. Pero podría esperarse de usted, como hombre de iglesia, que defendiera el orden social establecido. Un guardabosques jefe es poco más que un simple guardabosques, y estos no tienen refrigeradores para el vino ni una vajilla de plata como esta. Todo esto resulta muy inapropiado, y no es de extrañar que luego salgan señoritas como esa Cora.

Sidonie, dispuesta siempre a profetizar grandes calamidades cuando el espíritu la llevaba a descargar su ira, se habría convertido también ese día en una Casandra previendo un terrible futuro si en aquel instante no hubiesen servido el humeante ponche con el que los Ring ponían siempre fin a sus reuniones navideñas, acompañado de los dulces típicos que, hábilmente apilados, alcanzaban una altura aún mayor que la de las pirámides de pastas servidas unas horas antes con el café. Y ahora el mismo Ring, que hasta ese momento se había mantenido un tanto al margen, entró en acción con un brillante ceremonial, y empezó a llenar las copas de cristal alineadas ante él con un chorro artísticamente arqueado, una habilidosa manera de verter el líquido que la ingeniosa señora Von Padden —que hoy, por desgracia, estaba ausente— había calificado en una ocasión como «vertido ringuiano *en cascade*». El chorro describía un perfecto arco de un rojo dorado, sin que se derramara ni una sola gota. Finalmente, cuando todo el mundo tuvo en su mano la copa que le correspondía —incluso Cora, quien, con su ondulado cabello de un rubio rojizo, se había sentado entretanto en el regazo del «tío Crampas»—, el viejo señor de Papenhagen se levantó para realizar el brindis, como era tradicional en aquellas celebraciones, a la salud de su querido guardabosques jefe.

—Ring quiere decir «anillo». Hay muchos tipos de anillos: anillos de los árboles, anillas de las cortinas, anillos de alianza, y por lo que respecta a los anillos de compromiso, ya puestos a hablar, puedo decir felizmente que, dentro de muy poco, creo que en esta casa uno de estos adornará el dedo anular (en este caso, con doble sentido) de una pequeña y delicada mano…

—¡Qué escándalo! —murmuró Sidonie al oído del pastor.

—Sí, amigos míos —continuó Güldenklee, alzando la voz—, hay muchos anillos, e incluso una historia conocida por todos que se titula «Los tres anillos». Una historia judía que, como todas las pamemas liberales, sólo ha causado, y seguirá causando, confusión y desmanes. Que Dios nos asista y ponga pronto remedio. Y ahora permítanme que vaya acabando, para no abusar de su paciencia y su indulgencia más de lo debido. Yo no soy partidario de esos tres anillos, sino más bien de uno solo, este Ring, un anillo que es como debe ser, un Ring que ve reunido en torno a su hospitalaria mesa a lo mejor que de verdad tiene nuestro distrito de Kessin en la vieja Pomerania, a los que todavía defendemos a Dios, al rey y a la patria, y que aún somos muchos. —Grandes gritos de júbilo—. ¡Viva Ring!

Todos gritaron viva y se arremolinaron en torno a Ring, quien hubo de delegar su tarea de vertido *en cascade* en el comandante Crampas, que estaba sentado frente a él. Mientras tanto, el preceptor de la casa se levantó de su puesto en un extremo de la mesa y se sentó al piano para atacar los primeros acordes del himno de Prusia, y en el acto todos se pusieron en pie y entonaron solemnemente: «Soy prusiano… prusiano quiero ser».

—¡Esto sí que es hermoso! —dijo el viejo Borcke tras la primera estrofa, dirigiéndose a Innstetten—. Esto no lo tienen en otros países.

—No —contestó Innstetten, que no era muy partidario de tales patrioterismos—, en otros países tienen otras cosas.

Una vez cantadas todas las estrofas, se anunció que los coches estaban ante la puerta de la casa, e inmediatamente se levantaron todos para no hacer esperar a los caballos, ya que esta consideración «hacia los caballos» también constituía en todo el distrito de Kessin casi un artículo de fe. En el vestíbulo, dos lindas doncellas —Ring daba mucha importancia a estas cuestiones— ayudaban a los invitados a ponerse los abrigos de pieles. Todos estaban muy alegres, algunos algo más de la cuenta. La gente iba subiendo con excelente humor y sin mayores contratiempos a sus vehículos, hasta que de pronto alguien dijo que faltaba el trineo de Gieshübler. Este era demasiado bien educado para mostrarse inquieto, y mucho menos para armar algún revuelo; al final, como alguien tenía que decir algo, Crampas preguntó acerca de qué estaba pasando.

—Mirambo no puede conducir —dijo el mozo de cuadras—. Cuando trataba de engancharlo, uno de los caballos le ha dado una coz en una pierna. Está tirado en la cuadra, chillando de dolor.

Entonces, como es natural, se avisó al doctor Hannemann, que acudió enseguida y regresó al cabo de unos cinco minutos, asegurando con la serenidad propia de un cirujano:

—Sí, Mirambo tiene que quedarse. De momento, lo único que se puede hacer es dejarlo reposar tranquilo y aplicarle unas compresas frías. Por lo demás, la cosa no reviste ninguna gravedad.

Aquello suponía en cierto modo un consuelo, pero no solucionaba el incómodo problema de cómo regresaría a Kessin el trineo de Gieshübler. Innstetten se ofreció a sustituir a Mirambo y a conducir personalmente sana y salva a la doble constelación de médico y boticario hasta su destino. La propuesta fue aceptada entre risas y bromas subidas de tono dirigidas al más amable de los gobernadores, tan servicial que estaba incluso dispuesto a separarse de su joven esposa. Innstetten, con Gieshübler y el doctor en el asiento de atrás, se puso de nuevo al frente de la comitiva, seguido de Crampas y Lindequist. Y cuando Kruse se detuvo ante la puerta con el trineo del gobernador, Sidonie se acercó sonriente a Effi para preguntarle si, ya que quedaba una plaza libre, podía unirse a ella.

—En nuestro carruaje hace un calor sofocante, pero mi padre lo prefiere al trineo. Así también podré charlar un rato con usted. Pero sólo hasta Quappendorf. Allí, en el cruce de Morgnitz, tendré que bajarme y volver a subir a nuestra incómoda tartana, donde además papá no deja de fumar.

A Effi no le hacía mucha gracia esta compañía y habría preferido hacer el camino sola, pero no le quedaba otra elección, así que la señorita Grasenabb subió al trineo. Y, apenas habían tomado asiento las dos damas, Kruse fustigó a los caballos con un restallante latigazo, y el trineo, descendiendo por la rampa de la casa del guardabosque, con su magnífica vista sobre el mar, se deslizó por entre las dunas hasta enfilar el camino de la playa, que durante unos tres kilómetros conducía casi en línea recta hasta el hotel de Kessin, y desde allí, girando a la derecha y atravesando la plantación, hasta la ciudad. Hacía unas horas que había dejado de nevar, el aire estaba limpio y sobre el vasto mar caía la mortecina luz de la luna creciente. Kruse conducía el trineo muy cerca del agua, y de vez en cuando les llegaba la espuma de las olas al romper. Effi, temblando ligeramente por el frío, se arrebujó en su abrigo y siguió guardando un deliberado silencio. Sabía muy bien que el «calor sofocante del carruaje» era un mero pretexto y que si Sidonie había querido acompañarla no era más que para decirle algo desagradable. Además, estaba realmente cansada, tal vez a causa del paseo por el bosque, tal vez por haber rendido más honores de la cuenta al ponche de los Ring, animada por su vecina de mesa, la señora Von Flemming. Así que se hizo la dormida, cerrando los ojos e inclinando la cabeza cada vez más hacia la izquierda.

—No debería inclinarse tanto hacia la izquierda, señora. Si el trineo tropieza con una piedra, saldrá usted lanzada. Y, por lo que veo, su trineo no tiene tiras de protección, ni tampoco ganchos para sujetarlas.

—No soporto esos protectores; tienen un no sé qué de prosaicos. Y si salgo lanzada tampoco estaría tan mal, caería entre las olas. Claro que sería un baño muy frío, pero tanto da… Por cierto, ¿no oye usted nada?

—No.

—¿No oye como una música?

—¿De órgano?

—No, no es de órgano. Si lo fuera, pensaría que es el mar. No, es un sonido distinto, de una delicadeza infinita, casi como una voz humana…

—Son alucinaciones —repuso Sidonie, quien consideró llegado el momento de atacar—. Está usted enferma de los nervios. Oye voces. ¡Quiera Dios que las voces que oye sean las buenas!

—Oigo… no, está claro que es un disparate, lo sé. De no ser así, habría pensado que estaba oyendo cantar a las sirenas… Pero ¿qué es eso? ¿Esa luz que refulge y relampaguea en lo alto del cielo? Debe de ser la aurora boreal.

—En efecto —dijo Sidonie—. Pero veo, señora, que se comporta como si se tratase de algún prodigio de la naturaleza, y no lo es. Y aunque lo fuese, debemos guardarnos contra el culto a la naturaleza. Por otra parte, es una suerte que ya nos veamos libres del peligro de tener que escuchar a nuestro amigo Ring, el más vanidoso de los mortales, hablando acerca de la aurora boreal. Estoy segura de que pensaría que el cielo se la había enviado para dar mayor realce a su celebración. Es un necio. Güldenklee haría mejor en no elogiarlo tanto. Y ahora encima le ha dado por la religión, e incluso acaba de donar un mantel para el altar mayor, en cuyo bordado puede que también haya participado Cora. Esos falsarios son los culpables de todo, porque en realidad sólo les interesan las cosas mundanas, pero intentan hacerse pasar por aquellos a quienes de verdad nos importa la salvación de nuestras almas.

—¡Es tan difícil ver en el fondo de los corazones!

—Sí que lo es. Pero en algunos casos se ve muy claramente. Y al decir esto dirigió una penetrante mirada a la joven señora, que rayaba casi en la insolencia.

Effi calló y se volvió de lado con aire impaciente.

—En algunos casos, decía, se ve muy claramente —repitió Sidonie, que había logrado su objetivo y sonreía abiertamente—, y uno de los ejemplos más evidentes lo tenemos en nuestro guardabosques jefe. Reniego de quien educa a sus hijos de manera tan deplorable, pero al menos tiene una cosa buena, y es que no engaña a nadie. Ni él ni sus hijas. Cora se irá a América y se hará millonaria o predicadora metodista; en

cualquier caso, está perdida. En mi vida he conocido a una criatura de catorce años que…

En ese momento el trineo se detuvo, y cuando las dos damas miraron a su alrededor para averiguar lo que ocurría, observaron que a su derecha, a unos treinta pasos, estaban también parados los otros dos vehículos: el de Crampas más próximo a ellas y, algo más lejos, el conducido por Innstetten.

—¿Qué pasa? —preguntó Effi.

Kruse se giró de medio lado y contestó:

—El *schloon*, señora.

—¿Qué es el *schloon*? Yo no veo nada.

Kruse meneó la cabeza como dando a entender que la pregunta era más fácil de hacer que de responder. Y no le faltaba razón, porque no se puede explicar en pocas palabras lo que es el *schloon*. Sin embargo, el desconcierto de Kruse se vio pronto aliviado gracias a la señorita Grasenabb, quien conocía a la perfección todo lo que ocurría por aquellos lares, incluyendo, como es natural, el *schloon*.

—Verá, mi querida señora —dijo Sidonie—, la cosa tiene mala pinta. Para mí no resultará muy difícil, porque podré salir de aquí en cuanto lleguen los coches, ya que tienen las ruedas muy altas y los caballos ya están acostumbrados. Pero con estos trineos la cosa es diferente, se hunden en el *schloon*, y no tendrán más remedio que dar un rodeo.

—¿Hundirse? Por favor, señorita, explíquemelo mejor porque no me ha quedado claro. Pero ¿qué es el *schloon*, un abismo o algo así en el que desaparecen hasta las ratas? Nunca hubiera podido imaginarme que algo así pudiera ocurrir por estos contornos.

—Pues es algo así, pero en pequeño, claro. Este *schloon* no es más que un miserable arroyuelo que baja desde el lago Gothen abriéndose paso entre las dunas. En verano está seco y no se advierte, y se atraviesa sin darse cuenta.

—¿Y en invierno?

—En invierno es distinto. A menudo, aunque no siempre, se transforma en un *soog*…

—¡Dios mío, vaya nombres, qué palabras!

—… se transforma en un *soog*, que es mucho peor cuando el viento sopla hacia tierra. Entonces el viento empuja el agua del mar hacia el pequeño cauce, pero de una forma que no puede verse, y en eso precisamente reside el peligro. Porque todo ocurre bajo tierra, y toda la arena de la playa está saturada y llena de agua hasta gran profundidad. Y cuando intentas cruzar por un terreno así, que ya no es propiamente un arenal, te hundes como si fuera en un pantano o en una ciénaga.

—Ah, ya sé lo que es —dijo Effi, animada—. Es como nuestras marismas.

Y en medio de sus temores, sintió de pronto una alegre nostalgia.

Mientras tenían esta conversación, Crampas se había bajado de su trineo y se había acercado al de Gieshübler, que estaba parado un poco más allá, para discutir con Innstetten qué debían hacer. Dijo que Knut quería arriesgarse a pasar, pero Knut era estúpido y no entendía nada de aquello. Sólo ellos, que conocían aquellas tierras, podían tomar la decisión correcta. Innstetten, para gran sorpresa de Crampas, también se mostró partidario de arriesgarse, decía que había que intentarlo… Ya lo había visto antes y siempre era la misma historia: la gente del lugar estaba llena de temores supersticiosos, pero en realidad no había para tanto. Knut no estaba muy al tanto de cómo iba todo aquello, pero Kruse sí que podría intentarlo. Lo mejor sería que Crampas se montara en el trineo de las damas (quedaba un pequeño asiento en la parte de atrás) para poder echar una mano en caso de que volcara. Eso era, a fin de cuentas, lo más grave que podía ocurrir.

Crampas se presentó ante las damas con este mensaje de Innstetten, y cuando les hubo transmitido sonriente las órdenes recibidas, se subió al pequeño asiento trasero, que en realidad no era más que un listón forrado de paño, y gritó:

—¡Adelante, Kruse!

Este ya había hecho retroceder los caballos unos cien pasos, confiando en que, tomando impulso y velocidad, el trineo podría pasar al otro lado, pero en cuanto los caballos entraron en el *schloon* se hundieron hasta el corvejón, y sólo a duras penas lograron salir de allí.

—No se puede —dijo Crampas, y Kruse asintió.

Mientras tanto habían llegado por fin los carruajes, con el de Grasenabb al frente, y en cuanto Sidonie, después de dar escuetamente las gracias a Effi, se hubo despedido y sentado en el asiento trasero frente a su padre, que seguía fumando su pipa de tabaco turco, el coche arrancó en dirección al *schloon*. Los caballos se hundieron hasta las rodillas, pero la altura de las ruedas permitió salvar el obstáculo, y en menos de medio minuto el carruaje de los Grasenabb proseguía su camino al trote. Los demás coches le siguieron, y Effi los vio alejarse, no sin cierta envidia. Pero no le duró mucho, pues los conductores de los trineos ya se habían

puesto de acuerdo, o más bien habían aceptado la decisión de Innstetten de abandonar cualquier tipo de riesgo y optar por la solución más segura de dar un rodeo. Es decir, justo lo que Sidonie había previsto desde un principio. Desde el flanco derecho llegó la voz enérgica del gobernador, ordenando que de momento continuasen por aquel lado y le siguiesen a través de las dunas hasta un puente de tablas que había más arriba. En cuanto los dos cocheros, Knut y Kruse, recibieron las instrucciones, el comandante Crampas, que se había bajado cuando Sidonie para ayudarla, se volvió hacia Effi y le dijo:

—No puedo dejarla sola, señora.

Effi se quedó un momento indecisa, pero después se hizo rápidamente a un lado, y Crampas tomó asiento a su izquierda.

Aquello podría haber sido malinterpretado por Crampas, pero este conocía demasiado bien a las mujeres para que algo así halagara su vanidad. Veía claramente que Effi tan sólo hacía lo que resultaba más correcto: dada la situación, le era imposible rehusar su presencia. Y de este modo volvieron a emprender el camino detrás de los otros dos trineos, sin alejarse demasiado del cauce del arroyo, más allá del cual se alzaba la oscura masa boscosa. Effi miró hacia allí, y supuso que el viaje continuaría al otro lado del bosque, por el mismo camino que habían recorrido a primera hora de la tarde. Pero Innstetten tenía otros planes, y después de atravesar el puente de madera, en vez de elegir el camino que bordeaba el bosque, tomó por uno más estrecho que atravesaba la tupida masa boscosa. Effi se estremeció. Hasta entonces se había visto rodeada de aire y de luz, pero ahora desaparecían bajo la oscura bóveda que formaban las copas de los árboles. Un ligero temblor se apoderó de ella, y entrelazó los dedos con fuerza para dominarse. Pensamientos e imágenes se atropellaban en su mente, y una de esas imágenes era la de la madrecita de «La muralla de Dios», y, al igual que la ancianita del poema, también ella le rogaba a Dios que construyese una muralla a su alrededor. Unas dos o tres veces afloró la plegaria a sus labios, pero de pronto comprendió que eran palabras sin vida. Tenía miedo, pero también se sentía como bajo el influjo de un hechizo del que no deseaba librarse.

—Effi… —sonó en su oído una voz suave y temblorosa. Luego él le tomó las manos, deshizo el nudo de sus dedos entrelazados y los cubrió de apasionados besos. Ella se sintió como si fuera a desvanecerse.

Cuando volvió a abrir los ojos ya habían salido del bosque, y a muy poca distancia oyó el campanilleo de los trineos que les precedían con los caballos al galope. El sonido se fue haciendo cada vez más nítido, y cuando ya cerca del molino de Utpatel salieron de las dunas para dirigirse hacia la ciudad, empezaron a divisar a la derecha las casitas con sus tejados cubiertos de nieve.

Effi iba mirando a su alrededor, y al cabo de un instante el trineo se detenía delante de la casa del gobernador.



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Innstetten, que cuando ayudó a Effi a bajar del trineo la había escrutado con una mirada penetrante, aunque evitó toda conversación sobre aquel extraño viaje en pareja, se levantó temprano a la mañana siguiente e hizo cuanto pudo por dominar el mal humor que aún sentía.

—¿Has dormido bien? —preguntó cuando Effi se sentó a desayunar.

—Sí.

—Me alegro por ti. Yo no puedo decir lo mismo. He soñado que sufrías un accidente con el trineo en el *schloon*, y que Crampas hacía todo lo posible por salvarte, por decirlo de algún modo, ya que al final se hundía contigo.

—Has dicho eso en un tono muy extraño, Geert. Me parece que detrás de tus palabras se esconde algún reproche, y sospecho cuál es la causa.

—Qué curioso.

—No te pareció bien que Crampas fuera a ofrecernos su ayuda.

—¿Ofrecernos?

—Sí, ofrecernos. A Sidonie y a mí. Debes haber olvidado por completo que el comandante vino a propuesta tuya. Y una vez que se había sentado enfrente de mí, por cierto muy incómodamente en aquella estrecha y mísera tablilla, ¿qué querías que hiciera? ¿Echarle después de que llegaran los Grasenabb, cuando la expedición se puso enseguida en marcha? Habría hecho el ridículo, y tú eres muy susceptible a eso. Recuerda que en muchas ocasiones hemos salido a cabalgar juntos sin que a ti te pareciera mal, ¿y querías que ahora me negara a hacer el viaje en su compañía? Como se decía en mi casa, no se debe mostrar desconfianza hacia un noble.

—Un noble —repitió Innstetten con gran énfasis.

—¿Acaso no lo es? Tú mismo dijiste una vez que era caballero, incluso todo un caballero.

—Sí —continuó Innstetten, y su voz se tornó más amable, aunque con un ligero deje de ironía—, es un caballero, sin duda todo un caballero. ¡Pero un noble…! Mi querida Effi, un noble tiene una apariencia muy distinta. ¿Has visto alguna vez un punto de nobleza en él? Yo nunca.

Effi apartó la mirada y guardó silencio.

—Me parece que en esto somos de la misma opinión —añadió Innstetten—. Por lo demás, como muy bien has dicho, la culpa ha sido mía; no quiero hablar de un desliz, que no es la palabra más conveniente en estas circunstancias. Está bien, la culpa ha sido mía, y en la medida en que pueda evitarlo no volverá a ocurrir. Pero tú, si me permites el consejo, debes andarte también con cuidado. Es un hombre sin escrúpulos, y acostumbra a galantear con señoras jóvenes. Le conozco desde hace tiempo.

—Tendré en cuenta tus palabras, pero creo que te equivocas con él.

—No me equivoco con él en absoluto.

—Entonces conmigo —dijo ella en tono enérgico, desafiándole con la mirada.

—Tampoco me equivoco contigo, mi querida Effi. Eres una criatura encantadora, pero no se puede decir que la firmeza sea tu punto fuerte.

Se levantó para irse. Cuando llegaba a la puerta, entró Friedrich con una tarjeta de Gieshübler, dirigida por supuesto a la señora.

Effi la tomó.

—Correspondencia secreta con Gieshübler… —dijo—. Un nuevo motivo de celos para mi amo y señor. ¿No es así?

—No, mi querida Effi, no del todo. Ya ves, soy lo bastante ingenuo para ver la diferencia que existe entre Crampas y Gieshübler. No tienen, por así decirlo, los mismos quilates; los quilates no sólo sirven para calcular el valor del oro, sino también el de las personas. Yo, personalmente, si se me permite decirlo, aprecio mucho más las chorreras blancas de Gieshübler, aunque ya nadie lleve chorreras, que la rubia

perilla de Crampas. Pero dudo mucho que mi apreciación coincida con los gustos femeninos.

—Nos consideras más débiles de lo que somos.

—Un consuelo que en la práctica resulta extraordinariamente insignificante. Pero será mejor que lo dejemos. ¿Por qué no lees la nota?

Y Effi leyó:

> Permítame, señora, que me interese por su estado de salud. Sólo sé que salvaron felizmente el difícil escollo del *schloon*; pero atravesar el bosque ofrecía también numerosos peligros. El doctor Hannemann acaba de regresar de Uvagla y me ha tranquilizado sobre Mirambo; ayer consideraba su estado mucho más grave del que creyó conveniente decirnos, pero hoy ya no. Fue una excursión realmente emocionante.
>
> Dentro de tres días celebraremos Año Nuevo. Tendremos que renunciar a una gran fiesta como la del año pasado, pero naturalmente habrá baile, y su presencia sería celebrada sin duda por toda la concurrencia, y no digamos ya por su respetuoso admirador
>
> ALONZO G.

Effi se echó a reír.

—Bueno, ¿qué te parece?

—Lo que te decía: prefiero verte con Gieshübler antes que con Crampas.

—Porque tomas a Crampas demasiado en serio y a Gieshübler no tanto como deberías.

Innstetten, bromeando, la amenazó con el dedo.

Tres días más tarde se celebró la fiesta de Año Nuevo, y Effi se presentó luciendo un precioso vestido de noche, un regalo de Navidad, pero no bailó, sino que tomó asiento junto a las señoras mayores, para quienes se habían dispuesto unas butacas cerca de la orquesta. No había acudido ninguna de las familias nobles que los Innstetten solían frecuentar, ya que recientemente se había producido una pequeña disensión con la junta del casino, a la que el viejo Güldenklee había vuelto a acusar de «tendencias radicales». Sin embargo, sí habían asistido otras tres o cuatro familias nobles que no eran socias del casino pero a las que solían invitar, y cuyas fincas estaban situadas al otro lado del Kessine; y como habían tenido que venir atravesando el río helado, algunas desde muy lejos, ahora se sentían alegres de poder tomar parte en la fiesta. Effi estaba sentada entre la viuda del caballero diputado Von Padden y la señora Von Titzewitz, que era algo más joven. La anciana viuda era una dama de lo más singular, que trataba de compensar los rasgos sorbios casi paganos con que la había dotado la naturaleza, especialmente la configuración de sus prominentes pómulos, por medio de la estricta observancia de una inflexible religiosidad cristiana y germánica. Se mostraba tan severa y rigurosa en su fe que, a su lado, la misma Sidonie von Grasenabb era una especie de *esprit fort*. Pero, por otro lado —tal vez porque en su persona confluían las ramas de Radegast y Swantowit—, poseía también el buen humor con que la familia Padden había sido bendecida tradicionalmente, y con el cual caía simpática a todos aquel con quien se relacionaba, aunque fuese un adversario político o religioso.

—Dígame con sinceridad —dijo la anciana viuda—, ¿cómo le van las cosas?

—Muy bien, señora. Tengo un marido excelente.

—Lo sé. Pero eso no siempre basta. Yo también tenía un marido excelente. Pero ¿y usted? ¿No tiene tentaciones?

Effi se sobresaltó, pero al mismo tiempo se sintió conmovida. Había algo extraordinariamente reconfortante en aquel tono sencillo y natural con que se expresaba la vieja dama, y el hecho de que procediese de una señora tan devota lo hacía todavía más reconfortante.

—¡Ay, señora mía…!

—¿Lo ve? Ya me lo figuraba. Siempre es lo mismo. En estas cosas, los tiempos no cambian. Y tal vez sea mejor así. Pues cuando ocurre, mi querida y joven señora, lo importante es luchar. Siempre hemos de luchar contra nuestros instintos naturales. Y cuando una los tiene dominados, e incluso quiere gritar porque resulta muy doloroso, ¡entonces los dulces ángeles se llenan de júbilo!

—¡Ay, señora mía, a veces es tan difícil…!

—¡Pues claro que es difícil! Pero cuanto más enconada sea la lucha, más se saborea la victoria. Debería alegrarse de ello. Las tentaciones de la carne nos persiguen siempre, y yo, que tengo nietos y nietas, lo veo a diario. Pero, mi querida señora, conseguir vencerlas mediante la fe es lo más importante, ahí reside la verdad. Es lo que nos enseñó nuestro venerable Lutero. ¿No conoce sus *Conversaciones de sobremesa*?

—No, señora.

—Se lo enviaré.

En ese momento el comandante Crampas se acercó a presentar sus respetos a Effi, y esta enrojeció como si toda la sangre se le hubiera subido al rostro. Pero antes de poder responderle, Crampas dijo:

—¿Puedo pedirle, señora, que me presente a las damas? Entonces Effi pronunció el nombre del comandante, quien ya tenía conocimiento previo de quiénes eran las señoras y que inició una amena charla sobre todos los Padden y Titzewitz de los que había oído hablar. También se disculpó por no haber visitado aún a las distinguidas familias de la otra orilla del Kessine, y de no haberles presentado todavía a su esposa, y añadió que «es curioso el poder de distanciarnos que tiene el agua. Ocurre lo mismo con el canal de la Mancha…».

—¿Cómo? —preguntó la señora Titzewitz.

Crampas consideró innecesario dar explicaciones que no hubieran conducido a nada, y prosiguió:

—De cada veinte alemanes que viajan a Francia, prácticamente ninguno se acerca hasta Inglaterra. Y es por el agua; repito, el agua tiene un extraño poder para distanciarnos.

La señora Von Padden, que con fino instinto había adivinado en todo esto alguna doble intención, quiso intervenir en defensa del agua, pero Crampas siguió hablando con desbordante locuacidad y dirigió la atención de las señoras hacia la bella señorita Von Stojentin, «que sin duda es la reina de la fiesta». Y al decir esto, su mirada se detuvo por un momento, llena de admiración, en Effi. Luego, con una reverencia, se despidió de las tres señoras.

—¡Qué hombre tan apuesto! —comentó la señora Von Padden—. ¿Va mucho por su casa?

—De vez en cuando.

—Es verdaderamente apuesto —repitió la señora—. Quizá algo pagado de sí mismo. Y cuanto más se sube, más dura es la caída… Pero mírelo, se está acercando a Grete Stojentin. Es demasiado mayor para ella. Debe de tener cuarenta y muchos.

—Ha cumplido los cuarenta y cuatro.

—¡Ah, parece conocerle muy bien!

A Effi le vino muy bien que, ya desde su comienzo, el nuevo año trajese consigo toda clase de emociones. La noche de Fin de Año se había levantado un fuerte viento del nordeste, que en los días siguientes había ido creciendo en intensidad hasta convertirse casi en galerna. La tarde del 3 de enero se supo que un barco inglés, procedente de Sunderland, no había conseguido entrar en el puerto y había encallado a unos cien pasos del espigón, al parecer con siete hombres a bordo. Pese a todos sus esfuerzos, los prácticos no habían logrado hacer virar el barco hacia la dársena, y enviarles un bote desde la playa resultaba totalmente imposible, ya que el oleaje era demasiado poderoso. La cosa pintaba francamente mal, pero Johanna, que había traído la triste noticia, también ofreció un consuelo confortador: el cónsul Eschrich, con el aparejo de salvamento y la batería de cohetes, estaba ya en camino, y sin duda lograría rescatarlos. Después de todo, la distancia no era tan grande como la del año setenta y cinco, en la que también había intervenido el cónsul, y en aquella ocasión habían salvado incluso al perro; y fue muy conmovedor ver también la felicidad del animal, cómo lamía con su rosada lengua las manos de la señora del capitán y a su adorable niñito, no mucho mayor que la pequeña Annie.

—Yo también voy, Geert, no quiero perdérmelo —dijo Effi al instante.

Y salieron inmediatamente para no llegar demasiado tarde y, después de atravesar la plantación y salir a la playa, llegaron justo en el momento en que sonó el primer disparo, y vieron perfectamente cómo el cohete con la cuerda volaba bajo las nubes de tormenta y caía por el otro costado del barco. Todos los tripulantes a bordo se pusieron manos a la obra, y con ayuda de la soga arrastraron hacia la nave un cable más grueso con una cesta, y poco después se completó una especie de circuito. La cesta regresó a tierra llevando en su interior a uno de los marineros, un hombre delgado con una cara angelical bajo la capucha del impermeable de hule, al que todo el mundo no paraba de hacer preguntas mientras la cesta se ponía de nuevo en marcha para realizar un segundo viaje, luego un tercero, y así sucesivamente, hasta poner a salvo al último hombre. Cuando, media hora más tarde, Effi regresaba con su marido a casa, sintió deseos de dejarse caer sobre las dunas y llorar a lágrima viva. Su corazón albergaba aún sentimientos nobles, y eso la hacía inmensamente feliz.

Esto ocurría el 3 de enero. Y el día 5 experimentó una nueva emoción, aunque por supuesto de muy distinta índole. Innstetten se había encontrado con Gieshübler cuando este salía del ayuntamiento, y Gieshübler, quien como es natural también era concejal y consejero municipal, le había informado de que el

Ministerio de la Guerra quería saber cuál sería la posición de las autoridades locales ante la posibilidad de instalar en la ciudad una guarnición militar. Si la respuesta era favorable y estaban dispuestos a construir las casernas y cuadras necesarias, se les enviarían dos escuadrones de húsares.

—Y bien, Effi, ¿qué me dices a esto?

Effi se sintió extasiada. De repente toda la inocente felicidad de sus años de infancia invadió de nuevo su alma, y le pareció como si los rojos húsares —pues vestían también de rojo, como los de Hohen-Cremmen— fuesen una especie de guardianes del paraíso y de la inocencia. Pero continuó callada.

—¿Es que no vas a decir nada, Effi?

—Es extraño, Geert, pero me hace tan feliz que no acierto a encontrar las palabras. Entonces, ¿es seguro? ¿Vendrán de veras?

—Desde luego, queda por delante un largo camino. De hecho, Gieshübler ha llegado a decir que sus colegas, los próceres de la ciudad, no se lo merecían, ya que en vez de acoger por unanimidad el ofrecimiento y sentirse dichosos de tal honor, y si no del honor de las ventajas que reportaría a la población, han puesto toda clase de pegas y peros y han comenzado a escatimar fondos para las nuevas construcciones. Y por lo visto el hornero Michelsen ha dicho incluso que la soldadesca echaría a perder las buenas costumbres de la población, y que quienes tuvieran hijas ya podían ir poniendo rejas en sus ventanas.

—¡Es increíble! En mi vida he conocido a personas mejor educadas que nuestros húsares, en serio, Geert. Bueno, tú también lo sabes. Y ese Michelsen quiere enrejarlo todo. ¿Tiene hijas?

—Sí, tres. Pero todas *hors concours*.

Effi rio con tantas ganas como hacía tiempo que no reía. Pero su alegría no duró mucho, y cuando Innstetten se fue y la dejó sola, se sentó al lado de la cunita de la niña y sus lágrimas cayeron sobre los pequeños almohadones. De nuevo se sintió invadida por la sensación de sentirse como prisionera, sin posibilidad de escapatoria.

Esto la hacía sufrir enormemente, ya que quería liberarse de esa sensación, y aunque era capaz de experimentar sentimientos muy fuertes, no se caracterizaba por su fortaleza de espíritu. Le faltaban firmeza y perseverancia, y todo buen propósito estaba de antemano condenado al fracaso. Lo secreto y lo prohibido ejercían sobre ella un poder fascinante.

Y así fue como Effi, tan franca y espontánea por naturaleza, se fue acostumbrando cada vez más a fingir y disimular. A veces se espantaba de la facilidad con que lo hacía. Sólo en un aspecto seguía siendo la misma: lo veía todo tal como era, sin tratar de embellecer nada. En una ocasión, a última hora de la noche, se colocó delante del espejo del dormitorio; las luces y las sombras se deslizaban de un lado a otro y Rollo ladraba en la puerta, y por un instante le pareció como si alguien la mirara por encima del hombro. Pero se dominó rápidamente. «Ya sé lo que es. No es él. —Y con el dedo señaló hacia la sala encantada del piso de arriba—. Era otra cosa… era mi conciencia… Effi, ¡estás perdida!».

Pero las cosas siguieron su curso, la bola continuaba rodando, y lo que ocurría un día determinaba inexorablemente lo que sucedía al siguiente.

A mediados de mes, llegaron las invitaciones para ir al campo. Las cuatro familias con que los Innstetten tenían más trato social se habían puesto de acuerdo para celebrar sus fiestas según este orden: primero los Borcke, luego los Flemming y los Grasenabb, y por último los Güldenklee. Dejando siempre una semana entre cada visita. Las cuatro invitaciones llegaron el mismo día, claramente con el objeto de dar la impresión de que todo se hacía siguiendo un bien meditado orden, y también quizá para hacer ver que entre ellos existía una amistosa armonía.

—Yo no iré, Geert, a causa de la cura que llevo haciendo desde hace unas semanas, así que tendrás que excusarme de antemano.

Innstetten se echó a reír.

—La cura. Quieres que diga que no puedes ir a causa de la cura. Ese tal vez sea el pretexto, pero la realidad es que no quieres ir.

—No. Mi excusa es más sincera de lo que insinúas. Tú mismo quisiste que consultara al médico. Y ahora que lo he hecho, tengo que seguir sus consejos. El buen doctor ha encontrado que estoy anémica, por raro que parezca, y sabes muy bien que cada día tengo que tomarme el agua ferruginosa. Imagínate una cena en casa de los Borcke, tal vez con cabeza de jabalí y angulas en gelatina, y tendrás que reconocer que eso podría ser mortal para mí. Y supongo que no desearás algo así para tu Effi. Claro que hay veces en que pienso…

—Effi, por favor…

—Por lo demás, y eso es lo único que tiene de bueno, me hará ilusión poder acompañarte un trecho en

coche cada vez que vayas, hasta el molino seguro, o hasta el cementerio, o incluso hasta el borde del bosque, hasta el cruce de Morgnitz. Allí me bajaré y volveré caminando despacio. Es de lo más agradable pasear entre las dunas.

Innstetten estuvo de acuerdo, y cuando tres días más tarde el coche se detuvo ante la puerta, Effi subió también y acompañó a su marido hasta la entrada del bosque.

—Dile al cochero que pare aquí, Geert. Ahora tú continúas a la izquierda y yo seguiré por la derecha hasta llegar a la playa, y desde allí regresaré a casa a través de la plantación. Queda un poco lejos, pero no demasiado. El doctor Hannemann no deja de decirme cada día que lo más importante es el ejercicio, el ejercicio y el aire puro. Y creo que tiene bastante razón. Saluda de mi parte a todo el mundo; a Sidonie, no hace falta que te molestes.

Los viajes en coche acompañando a su marido hasta la entrada del bosque se repitieron todas las semanas. Pero el resto de los días Effi procuraba seguir también las instrucciones del doctor, y no dejaba pasar ni uno sólo sin hacer su recomendado paseo, sobre todo por la tarde, cuando Innstetten se enfrascaba en la lectura de la prensa. Hacía un tiempo agradable; el aire era limpio y templado, y el cielo estaba algo nublado. Solía ir sola, no sin antes decirle a Roswitha:

—Bajaré por la carretera y luego giraré a la derecha hasta llegar a la plaza del tiovivo. Esperaré allí a que vengas a buscarme, y luego regresaremos por la avenida de los abedules o por el sendero de la cuerda. Pero no vayas hasta que la pequeña Annie se haya dormido. Y si no se duerme, envía a Johanna. O si no, déjalo; no hace falta, ya puedo volver sola.

El primer día, en efecto, se encontraron donde habían acordado. Effi esperaba sentada en un largo banco adosado a un cobertizo, mientras contemplaba la casita de madera enjalbegada de amarillo y con vigas trianguladas pintadas de negro que tenía enfrente. Era una taberna frecuentada por gente sencilla que iba a beber cerveza y a jugar a las cartas. Apenas empezaba a oscurecer, pero ya había luz en las ventanas, cuyo resplandor iluminaba la nieve acumulada y los árboles cercanos.

—Mira, Roswitha, qué estampa tan bonita.

Esto se repitió durante un par de días. Pero la mayoría de las veces, cuando Roswitha llegaba a la placita del tiovivo y el cobertizo, no encontraba a nadie allí, y al regresar a casa la señora salía al recibidor y le decía:

—¿Dónde te metes, Roswitha? Ya hace rato que he vuelto.

Y de este modo pasaron algunas semanas. El proyecto de los húsares había quedado en dique seco, debido a los obstáculos que había puesto el concejo; sin embargo, las negociaciones no se habían roto definitivamente, y desde hacía un tiempo seguían por otra vía, concretamente a través de la autoridad militar del Estado Mayor. Así pues, Crampas fue convocado a Stettin, donde querían conocer su opinión. Al día siguiente a su llegada, escribió a Innstetten: «Le ruego me disculpe, Innstetten, por haberme despedido a la francesa, pero todo ha ocurrido muy deprisa. Por lo demás, intentaré demorar el asunto tanto como me sea posible, ya que supone todo un alivio pasar un tiempo fuera de casa. Salude respetuosamente a su esposa, mi amable benefactora».

Innstetten leyó la nota a Effi, quien permaneció impasible. Al cabo de un rato dijo:

—Me parece bien.

—¿Qué quieres decir?

—Que se haya marchado. Porque siempre está hablando de las mismas cosas. Así cuando regrese, al menos durante un tiempo, podrá contarnos algo nuevo.

Innstetten dirigió a Effi una mirada penetrante. Pero no vio nada, y sus sospechas volvieron a apaciguarse.

—Yo también me marcho —dijo él tras una pausa—, a Berlín. Y puede que como Crampas, cuando vuelva, tenga algo nuevo que contar. Mi querida Effi siempre quiere escuchar cosas nuevas; se aburre en nuestra vieja y tranquila Kessin. Estaré fuera una semana, tal vez un día más. Y no temas… no creo que vuelva… ya sabes, lo de ahí arriba… Y si vuelve, tienes a Rollo y a Roswitha.

Effi se sonrió con cierta melancolía, recordando el día en que Crampas le había dicho por primera vez que, con su fantasma, Innstetten estaba representando una comedia para manipular sus miedos. ¡El gran educador…! Pero ¿acaso no tenía razón? ¿No estaba justificada la comedia? Y toda clase de pensamientos contradictorios, buenos y malos, pasaron por su mente.

Al cabo de tres días, Innstetten se marchó.

No había dicho una palabra acerca del objeto de su viaje a Berlín.

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Sólo habían pasado cuatro días desde que Innstetten se marchara cuando Crampas regresó con la noticia de que los altos mandos habían desestimado definitivamente la idea de enviar dos escuadrones a Kessin. Eran tantas las pequeñas ciudades que deseaban acoger una guarnición de caballería, y más tratándose de los húsares del príncipe Blücher, que el Estado Mayor estaba habituado a que una oferta semejante fuese acogida de forma calurosa, y no con reservas y vacilaciones. Cuando Crampas informó de todo esto al concejo, sus miembros se quedaron bastante cariacontecidos; tan sólo Gieshübler se mostró exultante al ver castigada así la cicatería filistea de sus colegas. Al conocerse la noticia, se produjo un cierto malestar entre las gentes más sencillas del lugar, e incluso algunos cónsules que tenían hijas se sintieron momentáneamente decepcionados, pero en general el tema se olvidó muy pronto, quizá porque otra cuestión que acababa de surgir, «¿Qué habrá ido a hacer Innstetten a Berlín?», preocupaba mucho más a la población, o cuando menos a los dignatarios de la ciudad, que no se resignaban a perder a su muy estimado gobernador. Sin embargo, corrían todo tipo de rumores extravagantes que, si no habían sido inventados por Gieshübler, al menos habían sido alimentados y propagados por él. Entre otras cosas, se decía que Innstetten había sido designado para encabezar una delegación que viajaría a Marruecos para llevar regalos, y que en esta ocasión no se limitarían al tradicional jarrón con las reproducciones del Sanssouci y del Palacio Nuevo, sino que lo más importante sería una enorme máquina para fabricar hielo. Esto último, dadas las temperaturas de Marruecos, resultaba lo bastante verosímil para que la gente se lo creyera.

A Effi también le habían llegado estos rumores. Hasta no hacía mucho le habría divertido todo aquello, pero desde finales de año se encontraba en un estado de ánimo que le impedía reírse con alegría y naturalidad de ese tipo de cosas. Sus facciones habían adquirido una expresión muy diferente de aquella infantil, medio cándida, medio pícara, que había conservado incluso como mujer recién casada. Los paseos por la plantación y la playa, que había interrumpido durante la ausencia de Crampas, volvieron a reanudarse en cuanto este regresó de Stettin, y no renunciaba a ellos por muy mal tiempo que hiciese. Al igual que antes, volvieron a acordar que Roswitha fuera a buscarla a la salida del bosque o cerca del cementerio, pero, incluso con más frecuencia que antes, casi nunca lograban encontrarse.

—Roswitha, debería reñirte porque nunca me encuentras, pero tanto da. Ya no tengo miedo, ni siquiera cuando paso al lado del cementerio, y en el bosque aún no me he encontrado con un alma.

Eso lo dijo Effi el día antes de que Innstetten regresara de Berlín. Roswitha no le prestó demasiada atención, y prefirió seguir ocupándose de guarnecer con guirnaldas de ramas los marcos de las puertas; hasta el tiburón quedó adornado con una rama de pino, y presentaba un aspecto más estrambótico que de costumbre.

—Eso está muy bien, Roswitha —dijo Effi—. Así mañana, cuando llegue el señor, se alegrará de ver todo esto tan verde. No sé si salir hoy también. El doctor Hannemann siempre me está insistiendo en que no me tomo muy en serio sus indicaciones, pues de lo contrario ya tendría mejor aspecto. Pero hoy realmente no tengo muchas ganas de salir; está lloviznando y el cielo está muy negro.

—Le traeré el impermeable, señora.

—¡Sí, tráemelo! Pero no vengas a buscarme. De todos modos, no íbamos a encontrarnos —dijo riendo—. En serio, Roswitha, no sé dónde te metes. Y tampoco quiero que vayas a resfriarte, y total para nada.

Así pues, Roswitha se quedó, y como Annie estaba dormida, fue a casa de los Kruse a charlar un rato con la mujer.

—Querida señora Kruse, ayer me estaba contando la historia del chino cuando llegó Johanna y nos interrumpió. Ella es tan fina que hace ver que esas cosas son patrañas. Pero yo sí creo que hubo algo entre el chino y la nieta o la sobrina de Thomsen.

La señora Kruse asintió con la cabeza.

—O bien —continuó Roswitha— se trataba de un amor desgraciado —la señora Kruse volvió a asentir—,

o bien de un amor correspondido, y el chino no pudo soportar que de golpe todo hubiese acabado. Porque los chinos no dejan de ser también personas, y a ellos les pasan las mismas cosas y sienten lo mismo que nosotros.

—Lo mismo —aseguró la señora Kruse.

Y se disponía a demostrarlo prosiguiendo con la historia cuando entró su marido y dijo:

—Mujer, pásame el bote de lustrar el cuero. Mañana viene el señor y los arreos tienen que estar relucientes, porque no se le escapa nada y, aunque no lo diga, se fija en todo.

—Ahora se lo llevo yo, Kruse —dijo Roswitha—. Su señora está acabando de explicarme algo, pero termina enseguida, y después voy yo y se lo llevo.

Al cabo de unos minutos, Roswitha salió al patio con el bote en la mano y se acercó a la valla del jardín, donde Kruse había colgado los arreos.

—¡Vaya por Dios! —dijo él mientras cogía el bote—. De poco va a servirme si no para de lloviznar, ya que el lustre no durará mucho. Pero, en fin, hay que hacer las cosas como buenamente se pueda.

—¡Pues claro que sí! Y además, Kruse, se ve enseguida que es un cuero excelente, y cuando el cuero es bueno impregna enseguida y no tarda en secarse. Y mañana, si chispea o llueve, ya no le hará gran cosa. Pero déjeme decirle algo, y es que esa historia del chino es realmente extraña.

Kruse se echó a reír.

—¡Bobadas, Roswitha! Y mi mujer, en vez de ocuparse de lo que debería, siempre anda contando historias de esas, y cuando quiero ponerme una camisa limpia resulta que le falta algún botón. Y esto ocurre desde que llegamos a esta casa. No hace más que andar a vueltas con esas historias, y encima lo de la gallina, esa gallina negra que ni siquiera pone huevos. ¿Y cómo iba a ponerlos, si no sale de su falda? Y si no sale de ahí, a ninguna gallina se le puede pedir que haga nada sólo escuchando los quiquiriquís.

—Pero bueno, Kruse… eso pienso decírselo a su mujer. Siempre le he tenido por un hombre muy serio, y ahora me sale con eso del quiquiriquí. Los hombres tienen siempre más malicia de lo que se piensa una. Ahora tendría que coger ese pincel de ahí y pintarle unos bigotes negros.

—Bueno, Roswitha, viniendo de una mujer como usted, tendría que dejarme.

Y Kruse, que solía dárselas de persona formal, parecía querer derivar hacia un tono más pícaro cuando de pronto vio aparecer a la señora, que hoy llegaba por el otro lado de la plantación y que en ese momento cruzaba la verja del jardín.

—Hola, Roswitha. Pareces estar muy contenta. ¿Qué hace Annie?

—Está durmiendo, señora.

Pero, al decir esto, Roswitha se había puesto como la grana y se dirigió apresuradamente hacia la casa para ayudar a la señora a cambiarse, ya que no estaba segura de que Johanna estuviese allí. Últimamente pasaba mucho tiempo en la casa de la gobernación, porque ahora había menos trabajo en casa y tanto Christel como Friedrich le resultaban demasiado aburridos y nunca se enteraban de nada.

Annie seguía dormida. Effi se inclinó sobre la cuna, dejó que Roswitha le quitara el sombrero y el impermeable, y luego se sentó en el pequeño sofá del dormitorio. Se pasó lentamente la mano por el pelo mojado, puso los pies sobre un taburete que le acercó Roswitha y, disfrutando visiblemente de la placentera sensación que le proporcionaba el descanso después de un largo paseo, dijo:

—Tengo que recordarte, Roswitha, que Kruse es un hombre casado.

—Lo sé, señora.

—Sí, sabemos muchas cosas, pero a veces actuamos como si no las supiéramos. De eso no puede salir nada bueno.

—Ni yo espero que salga nada, señora.

—Porque si estás contando con que ella está enferma, te estás montando el cuento de la lechera. La gente enfermiza es la que más tiempo vive. Y luego está esa gallina negra. Más vale que te guardes de esa gallina, porque todo lo adivina y todo lo escampa. No sé por qué, pero me produce escalofríos de terror, y juraría que lo que ocurre en el piso de arriba está relacionado con la dichosa gallina.

—Oh, no lo creo. Pero, de todos modos, sí que resulta aterrador. Y Kruse, que siempre está en contra de lo que dice su mujer, no logrará hacerme cambiar de idea.

—¿Qué dice él?

—Dice que son sólo ratones.

—Bueno, pues eso es ya de por sí bastante malo. No puedo soportar los ratones. Pero he visto perfectamente cómo charlabas y bromeabas con Kruse, hasta me ha parecido oírte decir que querías pintarle unos bigotes negros. Eso es tomarse ya muchas confianzas. ¿Y adónde te llevará todo eso? Tú eres todavía muy linda, pero debes andarte con cuidado, eso es lo único que puedo decirte. ¿Qué te pasó

realmente aquella primera vez? ¿Te ves con fuerzas de contarlo?

—Oh, sí, claro que me veo. Pero fue espantoso. Tan espantoso fue que la señora puede estar bien tranquila por lo que respecta a Kruse. Cuando se ha sufrido por esto tanto como yo, una ya está muy escaldada y se anda con todo el cuidado del mundo. A veces sueño todavía con aquello, y por la mañana me siento como si me hubieran dado una paliza. Es una angustia tan espantosa…

Effi se había incorporado un poco y apoyaba la cabeza sobre un brazo.

—Bueno, cuéntame. ¿Cómo fue? A vosotras, eso lo sé de mi casa, siempre os suele ocurrir la misma historia…

—Sí, supongo que todo empieza siempre de la misma manera, y no pretendo decir que mi caso fuese nada extraordinario, de ningún modo. Pero cuando vinieron y me acusaron de ello a la cara, no tuve más remedio que decir: «Sí, lo estoy». Y fue horrible. Con mi madre aún, pero cuando se enteró mi padre, un hombre muy estricto que era el herrero del pueblo, se puso hecho una fiera y cogió un hierro ardiendo y vino hacia mí como para matarme. Y entonces empecé a chillar y salí corriendo a esconderme en el desván, y allí me quedé temblando hasta que me llamaron diciéndome que ya podía bajar. Y también tenía una hermana pequeña que siempre me señalaba con el dedo y me decía: «¡Qué vergüenza!». Luego, cuando llegó el momento de tener el niño, me fui a un granero vecino porque en casa no me atrevía. Allí unos desconocidos me encontraron medio muerta, me llevaron a casa y me acostaron en mi cama. El tercer día se llevaron al niño, y cuando pregunté por él, me contestaron que estaba en buenas manos. ¡Ay, señora, que la Virgen la guarde de sufrir semejante desdicha!

Effi se sobresaltó y miró a Roswitha con los ojos muy abiertos. Estaba más espantada que indignada.

—Pero ¡qué cosas dices! Yo soy una mujer casada. Ni se te ocurra decir algo así. Eso es una impertinencia.

—Ay, señora…

—Será mejor que me cuentes lo que te ocurrió después. Nos habíamos quedado en que te quitaron al niño…

—Y al cabo de unos días llegó alguien de Erfurt y preguntó en casa de los Schulze si no habría alguna nodriza por allí. Schulze le dijo que sí, Dios se lo pague, y aquel señor me llevó con él y desde entonces las cosas me han ido mejor. Incluso con la viuda del archivero no estaba tan mal como antes. Y luego entré a trabajar en su casa, señora, y esto ha sido lo mejor que me ha podido pasar.

Al decir esto, se acercó al sofá para besar la mano de Effi.

—Roswitha, no quiero que me estés besando siempre la mano, ya sabes que no me gusta. Y ándate con cuidado con Kruse. Tú eres una persona buena y sensata… Y él es un hombre casado… de ahí no puede salir nada bueno.

—¡Ay, señora! Dios y todos sus santos nos guían de formas misteriosas, e incluso las desgracias que nos envían pueden tener su lado bueno. Y quien no escarmienta es porque no tiene remedio. No es que los hombres me desagraden…

—¿Lo ves, Roswitha, lo ves?

—Pero si algo así me volviera a ocurrir… no digo con el señor Kruse, que con él no hay nada de nada… pero si me volviera a ocurrir, me tiraría al río. Fue demasiado horrible. Todo. ¿Y qué habrá sido de la pobre criatura? No creo que siga viva; seguro que la dejaron morir, pero la culpa es mía.

Y dejándose caer junto a la cuna de Annie, empezó a mecerla y a entonarle una y otra vez su «Buhküken von Halberstadt».

—No cantes más, Roswitha —dijo Effi—, me duele la cabeza. Tráeme los periódicos. ¿O ha enviado ya Gieshübler las revistas?

—Sí, ya las ha enviado. Y la de moda era la primera del montón. Johanna y yo la hemos estado hojeando, antes de que se marchara ahí enfrente. A Johanna siempre le da mucha rabia porque no puede tener todas esas cosas. ¿Le traigo también la revista de moda?

—Sí, tráemela, y también la lámpara.

Cuando Roswitha se marchó y Effi se quedó sola, esta dijo para sí:

—¡Ya ves qué consuelo…! Esta señora tan linda con un manguito, y esta otra con la cara medio tapada por un velo.

¡Maniquíes…! Pero no hay nada mejor que esto para apartarme de mis pensamientos.

A la mañana siguiente llegó un telegrama de Innstetten comunicando que vendría en el segundo tren, y que por tanto no llegaría a Kessin hasta el anochecer. Effi estuvo muy nerviosa todo el día, aunque por fortuna

Gieshübler se presentó a media tarde y la ayudó con su compañía a que pasara otra hora. A las siete, finalmente, el coche se detuvo delante de la casa. Effi salió a recibirle y se abrazaron. Innstetten estaba en un estado de excitación poco habitual en él, y por eso no percibió que en la calurosa acogida de Effi había mezclada cierta turbación. En el recibidor todas las luces estaban encendidas, y su resplandor se reflejaba sobre el servicio de té que Friedrich ya había dispuesto sobre la mesita colocada entre los dos armarios.

—Todo está exactamente igual que el día que llegamos aquí. ¿Te acuerdas, Effi?

Ella asintió sin decir palabra.

—Tan sólo el tiburón con su rama de pino parece estar hoy más tranquilo. Y a Rollo lo encuentro poco efusivo, ya que aún no me ha puesto las patas sobre los hombros. ¿Qué te pasa, Rollo?

El animal se restregó contra su dueño y meneó la cola.

—No está contento; algo le pasa, no sé si conmigo o con algún otro. Bueno, supongo que es conmigo. De todos modos, entremos.

Una vez en su despacho, se dejó caer en el sofá y pidió a Effi que tomara asiento a su lado.

—He tenido una estancia magnífica en Berlín, mejor de lo que me esperaba. Pero en medio de todas las alegrías te he añorado mucho. ¡Y qué buen aspecto tienes! Un poco pálida, un poco cambiada, pero te sienta bien.

Effi se ruborizó.

—No me digas que te estás ruborizando… Pero si es la verdad. Antes parecías una niña mimada, y de repente te has convertido en toda una mujer.

—Me gusta que me lo digas, Geert, pero creo que sólo lo dices por decir.

—No, en absoluto. Cuando te digo algo agradable es porque es así, y debes creerme.

—Debería hacerlo…

—Y ahora, adivina quién me ha dado recuerdos para ti.

—No me será muy difícil, Geert, porque nosotras las mujeres, y desde que has regresado ya me puedo contar entre ellas —y le tendió la mano sonriéndole—, somos muy buenas para estas cosas. Somos mucho más listas que vosotros.

—Bien, pues dime quién crees que te envía saludos.

—El primo Briest, sin duda. Es la única persona que conozco en Berlín, aparte de las tías, a las que no creo que hayas ido a ver, y aunque lo hubieras hecho son demasiado envidiosas para enviarme recuerdos. ¿No te has fijado en que todas las tías ancianas son siempre unas envidiosas?

—Sí, Effi, es verdad. Y cuando hablas así me recuerdas a la Effi de antes. Porque debes saber que la Effi de antes, la que parecía aún una niña, también me gustaba mucho. Tanto como la distinguida señora en que te has convertido.

—¿De veras? ¿Y si tuvieras que escoger entre las dos…?

—Esa es una pregunta capciosa, y no pienso caer en la trampa. Pero mira, aquí llega Friedrich con el té. ¡Cómo he echado de menos estos momentos…! Incluso se lo dije a tu primo Briest mientras bebíamos champán en el Dressel, brindando a tu salud… Seguro que te pitaron los oídos… ¿Y sabes qué dijo tu primo?

—Alguna necedad, como de costumbre.

—¡Eso es lo más terriblemente ingrato que he escuchado en mi vida! Lo que dijo fue: «¡A la salud de Effi, mi hermosa prima! ¿Sabe, Innstetten, que me gustaría desafiarle en duelo y matarlo? Porque Effi es un ángel, y usted me lo ha quitado». Y lo decía tan serio y compungido que resultaba de lo más creíble.

—¡Oh, ya me conozco sus estados de ánimo! ¿Cuántas copas llevabais?

—Ahora mismo no me acuerdo, y puede que tampoco lo supiera muy bien entonces. Pero yo creo que lo decía muy en serio. Y quizá no resultara algo tan desatinado. ¿No crees que os hubierais llevado muy bien?

—¿Llevarnos bien? Eso no quiere decir gran cosa, Geert. Pero no, creo que ni siquiera podríamos habernos llevado bien.

—¿Por qué no? Es un joven realmente simpático y agradable, y además bastante inteligente.

—Sí que lo es.

—Pero…

—Pero es muy infantil, y esa es una cualidad que no nos gusta a las mujeres, ni siquiera cuando somos medio niñas, como tú siempre me has considerado, y quizá sigues considerándome pese a todos mis progresos. No nos gustan los niños. Nos gusta que los hombres sean hombres.

—Me alegra que digas eso. Vaya, más me valdrá demostrar toda mi hombría… Y, por una feliz coincidencia, te puedo decir que lo que acabo de hacer ha puesto a prueba todo mi aplomo, sobre todo de cara al futuro… Dime, ¿qué te parecería un ministerio?

—¿Un ministerio? Bueno, pueden ser dos cosas: una asamblea de hombres muy inteligentes y distinguidos que dirigen el Estado, o también puede ser una casa, un *palazzo*, como el *palazzo* Strozzi o el Pitti, o cualquier otro si estos no se ajustan. Como ves, mi viaje a Italia también sirvió para algo.

—¿Y tú serías capaz de vivir en uno de esos *palazzi*? Quiero decir, ¿en un ministerio?

—¡Por Dios, Geert, no irás a decirme que te han hecho ministro! Ya lo decía Gieshübler. El príncipe Bismarck tiene mucho poder. ¡Dios mío! ¿Puede ser que ya lo hayas conseguido, y yo sólo con dieciocho años?

Innstetten se echó a reír.

—No, Effi, no me han hecho ministro, aún no. Pero a partir de ahora podré demostrar todas mis cualidades, y es muy posible que algún día…

—Entonces, ¿todavía no te han hecho ministro?

—No. Y, para serte sincero, de momento tampoco viviremos en ningún ministerio, aunque tendré que ir a uno todos los días, como voy ahora a la casa de la gobernación, para despachar con el ministro y acompañarle en sus viajes de inspección por las provincias. Y tú serás la esposa de un consejero ministerial y vivirás en Berlín, y dentro de medio año apenas recordarás que viviste en Kessin sin más compañía que la de Gieshübler, las dunas y la plantación.

Effi no decía nada. Sus ojos se iban agrandando cada vez más, las comisuras de sus labios latían como presas de un espasmo nervioso y su cuerpo frágil se vio sacudido por un ligero temblor. De pronto se dejó caer a los pies de Innstetten y, abrazándole las rodillas, exclamó como si rezara:

—¡Gracias a Dios!

Innstetten palideció. ¿Qué era aquello? En los ojos del hombre apareció aquella mirada recelosa que desde hacía semanas se había traslucido de forma pasajera, pero que ahora regresó con tal intensidad que Effi se asustó. Al dejarse arrastrar por un sentimiento noble, que no era otra cosa que el reconocimiento de su culpa, había dicho más de lo que debía. Tenía que arreglarlo, tenía que encontrar una salida, costara lo que costase.

—Levántate, Effi. ¿Qué te pasa?

Effi se incorporó rápidamente. Pero no volvió a sentarse en el sofá, sino que permaneció de pie apoyada sobre el respaldo de una silla, evidentemente sin fuerzas para mantenerse derecha.

—¿Qué te pasa? —repitió Innstetten—. Yo creía que habías vivido aquí días felices, y ahora exclamas «¡Gracias a Dios!» como si todo no hubiera sido más que una pesadilla. ¿Es que he sido una pesadilla para ti? ¿O se trata de otra cosa? ¡Habla!

—¿Y aún tienes el valor de preguntármelo, Geert? —dijo ella, haciendo un supremo esfuerzo por dominar el temblor de su voz—. ¡Días felices! Sí, claro que los ha habido, pero también ha habido otras cosas. Nunca he conseguido superar el miedo a vivir aquí, ¡nunca! No hace ni dos semanas que volvió a mirarme por encima del hombro. El mismo rostro lívido de siempre. Y en estas últimas noches, mientras tú estabas fuera, ha vuelto. No le vi la cara, pero sí oí el arrastrar de pies, y Rollo empezó a ladrar, y Roswitha, que también lo oyó, vino y se sentó al lado de mi cama, y no pudimos dormirnos casi hasta el amanecer. Sí, esta casa está encantada, y me he visto obligada a creerme toda esa historia del fantasma porque tú… eres un educador. Sí, Geert, eso es lo que eres. Pero eso es lo de menos, porque lo único que sé es que durante más de un año he pasado miedo en esta casa, y creo que cuando me marche de aquí todo eso desaparecerá y me sentiré por fin liberada.

Innstetten la había estado mirando fijamente y había escuchado con suma atención todas sus palabras. ¿Qué quería decir con eso de «eres un educador»? ¿Y lo que había dicho antes: «me he visto obligada a creerme toda esa historia del fantasma»? ¿Qué significaba todo eso? ¿De dónde lo había sacado? Innstetten sintió que su leve sospecha volvía a cobrar fuerza. Pero también tenía bastante experiencia de la vida para saber que los indicios pueden ser engañosos, y que los celos, pese a sus cien ojos, pueden inducirnos más fácilmente al error que la confianza ciega. Lo que decía Effi podía ser verdad. Y, en tal caso, ¿por qué no habría de exclamar «¡Gracias a Dios!»?

Así pues, analizando rápidamente todas las posibilidades, Innstetten refrenó su suspicacia y tendió la mano a su esposa por encima de la mesa.

—Perdóname, Effi, pero es que todo esto me ha pillado muy de sorpresa. Toda la culpa es mía. Siempre he estado demasiado ocupado con mis asuntos. Los hombres somos muy egoístas. Pero a partir de ahora todo será diferente. Berlín tiene una cosa buena: allí no hay casas con fantasmas. ¿De dónde iban a salir? Y ahora vayamos a ver a Annie; si no, Roswitha pensará que soy un padre poco afectuoso.

Conforme Innstetten hablaba, Effi se había ido tranquilizando poco a poco, y la sensación de haberse librado felizmente de un peligro que ella misma se había creado hizo que recuperara su templanza y su

compostura.

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A la mañana siguiente desayunaron juntos algo más tarde de lo habitual. Innstetten ya había superado su mal humor y aquella sensación aún peor de desazón, y Effi experimentaba con tal intensidad el sentirse liberada que no sólo había recuperado la capacidad para fingir alegría, sino que incluso se mostraba casi tan espontánea como antes. Aún estaba en Kessin, pero tenía la impresión de que todo aquello pertenecía a un pasado muy lejano.

—He estado dándole vueltas, Effi —dijo Innstetten—, y creo que no estabas muy equivocada en todo lo que dijiste ayer sobre nuestra casa. Puede que estuviera muy bien para el capitán Thomsen, pero no para una mujer joven y mal acostumbrada como tú. Hay muy poco espacio y todo está pasado de moda. Ya verás como en Berlín estarás mucho mejor. Tendrás una casa con un gran salón, no como aquí. Y en el vestíbulo y en la escalera habrá altos ventanales con vidrieras policromadas que representen al káiser Guillermo portando cetro y corona, o también con motivos religiosos, santa Isabel, por ejemplo, o quizá la Virgen María. Sí, mejor la Virgen María, se lo debemos a Roswitha.

—Así sea —dijo Effi riendo—. Pero ¿quién nos buscará la casa? No puedo encargárselo al primo Briest. Ni tampoco a mis tías, que se conformarían con cualquier cosa.

—Es cierto, hay que buscar una casa, y es una ingrata tarea para ser encomendada a cualquiera. Deberías hacerlo tú misma.

—¿Y cuándo crees que debería ir?

—A mediados de marzo.

—¡Oh, eso es demasiado tarde, Geert! Para entonces ya no quedará nada. Las buenas casas no van a estar esperándonos.

—Tienes razón. Pero ten en cuenta que llegué ayer por la noche y no voy a decirte: «Sal mañana mismo». Eso no va conmigo, y tampoco me apetece nada: tengo ganas de estar contigo.

—Oh, no —dijo ella recogiendo ruidosamente la vajilla del café para disimular su nerviosismo—, no tiene que ser ni hoy ni mañana, pero sí en los próximos días. Y en cuanto encuentre algo, vuelvo enseguida. Ah, otra cosa: Roswitha y Annie tienen que venir conmigo. También sería muy agradable que tú nos acompañaras, pero entiendo que no pueda ser. Y no va a ser una separación muy larga. Ya sé dónde voy a alquilar la casa…

—¿Ah, sí?

—Es un secreto. Yo también quiero tener un secreto. Así podré sorprenderte.

En ese instante entró Friedrich con el correo. La mayor parte eran documentos oficiales y diarios.

—Ah, también hay una carta para ti —dijo Innstetten—. Si no me equivoco, la letra es de tu madre.

—Sí —dijo Effi tomando la carta—, es de mamá. Pero el matasellos no es el de Friesack. ¡Mira, aquí pone claramente Berlín!

—Pues claro —contestó Innstetten riendo—. Lo dices como si fuera un milagro. Eso es que tu madre debe de estar en Berlín y desde el hotel le ha escrito una carta a su querida hija.

—Sí, debe de ser eso. Pero me he asustado un poco, y no me consuela mucho lo que siempre decía Hulda Niemeyer: «Más vale ponerse siempre en lo peor». ¿Tú qué piensas?

—Que no me parece un comentario muy apropiado para la hija de un pastor. Pero lee la carta. Aquí tienes una plegadera.

Effi abrió el sobre y leyó:

Mi querida Effi:

Hace veinticuatro horas que estoy en Berlín. He venido a visitar al doctor Schweigger, y en cuanto me ha visto me ha felicitado. Cuando le he preguntado muy sorprendida por la causa, me ha dicho que acababa de ir a verle el director ministerial Wüllersdorf y le había informado de que Innstetten había recibido un cargo en el

ministerio. Me ha molestado un poco tener que enterarme por terceras personas, pero me siento tan feliz y orgullosa que os perdono. Siempre he sabido (ya desde que I. estaba con el regimiento de Rathenow) que llegaría lejos, y ahora tú cosecharás los beneficios. Como es natural, tendréis que buscar una casa nueva y comprar muebles. Querida Effi, si crees que mis consejos podrían serte de utilidad, entonces deberías venir tan pronto como te sea posible. Estaré ocho días aquí para seguir un tratamiento, tal vez un poco más si no obtengo los efectos esperados. Schweigger se ha mostrado algo impreciso al respecto. He alquilado una habitación en la Schadowstrasse, y todavía quedan algunas libres junto a la mía. Sobre lo que le pasa a mi ojo, ya te lo explicaré en persona; por el momento, lo que más me preocupa es vuestro porvenir. Briest se alegrará mucho cuando lo sepa; siempre hace ver que no le interesan estas cosas, pero en el fondo le importan más que a mí. Da recuerdos a Innstetten y muchos besos para Annie. Espero que la traigas contigo. Tu madre, que te quiere,

LUISE VON B.

Effi dejó la carta y guardó silencio. Ya tenía muy claro lo que iba a hacer, pero no quería ser ella quien lo dijera. Esperaría a que Innstetten tomara la decisión y entonces ella aceptaría, vacilante.

Innstetten cayó en la trampa.

—Bueno, Effi, ¿no dices nada?

—¡Ay, Geert!, no sé muy bien qué hacer. Por una parte, me alegraría mucho poder ver a mamá, a ser posible dentro de pocos días. Pero, por otra, también le veo muchos inconvenientes.

—¿Como cuáles?

—Bueno, ya sabes que mamá es de ideas muy fijas y siempre quiere hacer su voluntad. Con papá nunca le ha resultado muy difícil. Pero a mí me agradaría tener una casa a mi gusto, con muebles que me gusten a mí.

Innstetten se echó a reír.

—¿Y eso es todo?

—¿Te parece poco? Pero no es sólo eso. —Y entonces se recompuso, lo miró a la cara y le dijo—: Verás, Geert, no me gustaría separarme tan pronto de ti.

—Pero mira que eres pícara, eso lo dices porque conoces mi punto débil. Pero todos tenemos nuestra vanidad, así que prefiero creerte. Prefiero creerte, y al mismo tiempo tengo que representar heroicamente mi papel de hombre resignado. Vete en cuanto creas conveniente, cuando tu corazón te lo permita.

—¡Ah, no digas esas cosas, Geert! ¿Qué significa eso de «cuando tu corazón te lo permita»? Es una forma de obligarme a comportarme como una mujer encantadora que, por pura coquetería, tendría que responder «¡Oh, Geert, entonces no me iría nunca!», o alguna cosa por el estilo.

Innstetten hizo un gesto amenazador con el dedo.

—Eres demasiado astuta para mí, Effi. Siempre había pensado que eras una niña, y ahora me doy cuenta que estás a la altura de las demás. Pero dejémoslo estar, porque como dice siempre tu padre, «eso sería el cuento de nunca acabar». Bueno, entonces, ¿cuándo te irías?

—Hoy es martes. Si te parece bien el viernes, en el barco del mediodía. Así por la noche ya estaré en Berlín.

—De acuerdo. ¿Y cuándo regresarías?

—¿Qué te parece el lunes por la noche? Así tendría tres días.

—Imposible, eso es muy poco tiempo. En tres días no podrías arreglar nada. Y además tu madre no te dejaría venir tan pronto.

—Entonces no fijamos fecha.

—Muy bien.

Y con estas palabras, Innstetten se levantó de la mesa para ir al despacho de la casa de la gobernación.

Los días que faltaban para salir de viaje pasaron volando. Roswitha estaba exultante.

—Ah, señora, Kessin está muy bien… ¡pero no es Berlín! Y los tranvías de caballos… Cuando tocan la campanilla, y no sabes si tirar a la derecha o a la izquierda. A veces parecía que se me iban a echar encima. No, esas cosas no las hay aquí. Aquí hay días que no se ven ni media docena de personas. Tan sólo las dunas, y más allá el mar, siempre rugiendo, y nada más.

—Sí, Roswitha, tienes razón. El mar siempre rugiendo, pero aquí no hay mucha vida. Y eso hace que a veces una piense sólo en tonterías. Porque no me negarás, por ejemplo, que toda esa historia con el señor Kruse no es una tontería.

—Pero, señora…

—Bueno, no pienso interrogarte, porque al final no vas a reconocer nada. En fin, Roswitha, te puedes

llevar todas tus cosas, y también las de Annie.

—¿Es que no vamos a volver?

—Yo sí. El señor quiere que vuelva. Pero vosotras quizá podáis quedaros allí con mi madre. Lo que has de procurar es que no malcríe demasiado a Annie. Conmigo era a veces severa, pero con una nieta…

—Pero es que Annie es una ricura, y no es extraño que todo el mundo quiera mimarla.

Esta conversación tuvo lugar el jueves, la víspera del viaje. Innstetten había salido a recorrer distintos puntos de la comarca y no se le esperaba hasta la noche. Por la tarde, Effi fue a la ciudad, se dirigió a la plaza del mercado y entró en la farmacia para comprar un frasco de *sal volatile*.

—Nunca se sabe con quién vas a viajar —le dijo al viejo dependiente con el que siempre solía charlar un poco y que la adoraba casi tanto como Gieshübler.

—¿Sabe si el doctor está en casa? —preguntó después de guardar el frasquito en su bolso.

—Sí, señora. Está ahí al lado, leyendo el periódico.

—¿No cree que le molestaré?

—¡De ningún modo, señora!

Effi pasó a una pequeña habitación de techo alto rodeada de estantes, sobre los cuales había toda clase de frascos y retortas. En una de las paredes se veían, ordenadas alfabéticamente, las cajas con anillas de hierro delante donde se guardaban todas las recetas.

Gieshübler se mostró encantado y también algo incómodo.

—¡Cuánto honor, señora, recibirla aquí entre mis retortas! ¿Me permite que la invite a tomar asiento un momento?

—Por supuesto, querido Gieshübler. Pero no puedo quedarme mucho tiempo. Sólo he venido a despedirme.

—Pero, señora, si va a volver muy pronto. Según tengo entendido, sólo estará fuera tres o cuatro días.

—Sí, querido amigo, esa es la intención, y está previsto que esté de vuelta en Kessin dentro de una semana, como mucho. Pero también podría ocurrir que no vuelva. Ya sabe que pueden pasar muchas cosas… Y veo que va a decirme que soy demasiado joven… pero los jóvenes también pueden morir. Quién sabe, ¡pueden ocurrir tantas cosas! Y por eso prefiero despedirme de usted como si fuera para siempre.

—¡Pero, mi muy querida señora…!

—Como si fuera para siempre. Quiero darle las gracias, querido Gieshübler, porque usted ha sido muy bueno conmigo, el mejor amigo que he encontrado aquí. Nunca le olvidaré aunque viva cien años. A veces me he sentido muy sola, y también con el corazón oprimido, más triste de lo que se pueda imaginar. Y no siempre he hecho lo que debería. Pero cuando le veía a usted, desde el primer día que le conocí, me sentía mejor y más aliviada.

—¡Pero, querida señora…!

—Y por tal motivo quería darle las gracias. Acabo de comprar un frasco de *sal volatile*. En el compartimento a veces te encuentras con gente muy rara, que ni siquiera te deja abrir la ventanilla. Y si los ojos se me llenan de lágrimas, porque a veces las sales se te suben a la cabeza, pensaré en usted. Adiós, querido amigo, y dé muchos recuerdos de mi parte a su amiga, la señorita Trippelli. En estas últimas semanas he pensado con frecuencia en ella y en el príncipe Kotschukoff. La suya es una relación bastante peculiar, pero puedo entenderla… Y no deje de enviarme noticias suyas de vez en cuando. Por mi parte, prometo hacer lo mismo.

Y diciendo esto, Effi se marchó. Gieshübler la acompañó hasta la plaza. Se sentía aturdido, ya que no acababa de entender muchas de las desconcertantes cosas que había dicho la joven.

Effi regresó a casa.

—Tráigame la lámpara, Johanna —dijo—, y también una taza de té, pero a mi dormitorio. Tengo tanto frío que no puedo esperar hasta que vuelva el señor.

Cuando le trajo ambas cosas, Effi ya estaba sentada ante su pequeño escritorio, con una hoja de carta delante y la pluma en la mano.

—Por favor, Johanna, deje el té aquí sobre la mesa. Cuando la doncella salió de la habitación, Effi cerró la puerta con llave, se miró un instante al espejo y volvió a sentarse. Empezó a escribir:

> Mañana me marcho en el barco, y estas líneas son mi despedida. Innstetten espera mi regreso dentro de unos días, pero no volveré… Y usted sabe cuál es la razón… Lo mejor para mí habría sido no haber conocido nunca este país. Le ruego que no lo interprete como un reproche: toda la culpa ha sido mía. Cuando pienso en su

situación familiar… su comportamiento puede ser excusable, pero el mío no. Mi culpa es muy grave, pero aún puedo salvarme. El hecho de que nos trasladen a Berlín es para mí como una señal de que aún puedo obtener la gracia del perdón. Olvide todo cuanto ha ocurrido. Olvídeme. Suya,

EFFI

Releyó la nota. Lo que más extraño le sonaba era el «usted», pero era como debía ser: era necesario para dejar claro que ya no existía ningún puente entre ellos. Luego metió la carta en un sobre y se dirigió a una casa situada entre el cementerio y la margen del bosque. Un hilo de humo salía de la chimenea de piedra medio derruida. Allí entregó la carta.

Cuando volvió, Innstetten ya estaba en casa. Ella se sentó a su lado y le contó lo de Gieshübler y la *sal volatile*.

Innstetten se echó a reír.

—¿De dónde sacas esos latinajos, Effi?

El barco, un velero ligero (los vapores sólo funcionaban en verano), salía a las doce. Effi e Innstetten ya estaban a bordo un cuarto de hora antes, junto con Roswitha y Annie.

Llevaban más equipaje del que parecía necesario para un viaje de tan pocos días. Innstetten hablaba con el capitán; Effi, que llevaba un impermeable y un sombrero gris claro, estaba sobre la cubierta de popa, cerca del timón, y desde allí contemplaba el baluarte y la hermosa hilera de casitas que lo bordeaban. Justo enfrente del embarcadero se alzaba el hotel de Hoppensack, un elevado edificio de tres pisos en lo alto del cual ondeaba flácida, en el aire quieto y brumoso, una bandera amarilla con la cruz y la corona. Effi alzó la mirada un instante hacia la bandera y luego volvió a bajarla hacia las personas que curioseaban por el muelle. En ese instante sonó la sirena. Effi tuvo una sensación extraña; el barco se puso lentamente en movimiento y, cuando miró una vez más hacia el embarcadero, vio que Crampas estaba en primera fila. Al encontrarse sus miradas, Effi experimentó una mezcla de temor y alegría. Por su parte, Crampas, con una presencia de ánimo muy distinta y visiblemente emocionado, le dirigió un saludo muy serio, al cual ella respondió con la misma gravedad, pero también con mucha cordialidad y una especie de súplica en los ojos. Effi bajó rápidamente a su camarote, donde Roswitha y Annie ya se habían instalado. Se quedó en aquel espacio un tanto opresivo y sofocante hasta que el barco dejó atrás el río y entró en la amplia bahía del Breitling. Entonces llegó Innstetten y le dijo que subiera a cubierta para gozar de la magnífica vista que ofrecía el paisaje en aquel lugar. Sobre el espejo del agua se reflejaban las nubes grises, entre las cuales de vez en cuando se filtraba un difuso rayo de sol. Effi recordó que ese día se cumplían exactamente quince meses de su viaje en coche abierto a lo largo de la ribera del Breitling. Y en tan corto espacio de tiempo, en medio de aquella vida tranquila y aislada, ¡cuántas cosas habían sucedido!

El barco remontó el curso del río y a las dos llegaban ya a la estación, o muy cerca de ella. Cuando poco después pasaron por delante de la posada Príncipe Bismarck vieron de pie ante la puerta a Golchowski, quien se prestó a acompañar al gobernador y a su señora hasta las escaleras del talud. El tren aún no había anunciado su llegada y Effi e Innstetten pasearon arriba y abajo por el andén. El tema de conversación era la casa de Berlín; ambos coincidían en que debía estar situada entre el Tiergarten y el jardín zoológico.

—Quiero oír el canto de los pinzones, y también el de los papagayos —dijo Innstetten, y Effi asintió con la cabeza.

Entonces se oyó el silbido del tren, que poco después hizo su entrada. El jefe de estación se mostró muy amable e instaló a Effi en un compartimento para ellas solas.

Se estrecharon manos, se agitaron pañuelos, y el tren se puso nuevamente en marcha.

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La estación de Friedrichstrasse estaba abarrotada de gente, pero aun así Effi ya había divisado desde el compartimento a su madre y, junto a ella, al primo Briest. La alegría del reencuentro fue enorme, la espera en la sala de equipajes no puso a prueba su paciencia, y en cuestión de poco más de cinco minutos el coche de alquiler rodaba ya junto a los raíles del tranvía de caballos de la Dorotheenstrasse en dirección a la Schadowstrasse, donde se encontraba la pensión, justo en la primera esquina. Roswitha estaba exultante y se reía cada vez que veía a Annie alargar sus manitas hacia las farolas de la calle.

Llegaron a la pensión. Effi se instaló en sus dos habitaciones, que no estaban, como había esperado, junto a las de la señora Von Briest, aunque sí en el mismo pasillo. Cuando todo estuvo colocado en su sitio y Annie cómodamente acostada en su camita con barrotes, Effi se presentó en la habitación de su madre, un pequeño salón con una chimenea en la cual ardía un pequeño fuego, ya que la temperatura era apacible y templada. Una mesa redonda, adornada con una lámpara de pantalla verde, estaba preparada para tres personas, y junto a ella había una mesita auxiliar con el juego de té.

—Qué apartamento tan encantador, mamá —dijo Effi sentándose en la silla que había frente al sofá, para levantarse de inmediato y acercarse a la mesita del té—. ¿Me permites que vuelva a hacer de señorita que sirve el té?

—Pues claro, mi querida Effi, pero sólo para Dagobert y para ti. Yo he tenido que renunciar, y sabe Dios cuánto me cuesta.

—Comprendo. A causa de la vista, ¿no? Pero dime, mamá, ¿qué tienes? En el coche, que además no paraba de traquetear, no hemos hecho más que hablar de Innstetten y de nuestra gran carrera. Y ya es hora de que hablemos de ti y de tus ojos, que son mucho más importantes para mí, y en los que hay algo que, gracias a Dios, no ha cambiado, y es el hecho de que me miran con la misma bondad y afecto que antes.

Y corrió hacia su madre para besarle la mano.

—¡Pero qué impetuosa…! La misma Effi de siempre…

—No, mamá, no soy la misma. Ya me gustaría, pero el matrimonio cambia a las personas.

El primo Briest se echó a reír.

—Pues yo no veo que hayas cambiado mucho, prima. Sólo veo que estás mucho más guapa, pero no me parece que hayas perdido mucho de tu carácter impetuoso.

—Él sí que sigue siendo el de siempre —exclamó la madre. Y Effi, que no quería oír hablar de aquellas cosas, dijo:

—Dagobert, puede que sepas de muchas cosas, pero no sabes nada de las personas. Es curioso, vosotros los oficiales no conocéis a la gente, y los jóvenes aún menos. No hacéis más que miraros a vosotros mismos o a vuestros reclutas, y los de caballería, además, a sus caballos. Esos sí que no saben de nada.

—Pero, prima, ¿de dónde has sacado toda esa sabiduría? Tú apenas conoces a oficiales. Según he leído, Kessin ha renunciado a los húsares que les querían destinar, lo cual, por cierto, me parece algo insólito en la historia mundial. ¿O es que quizá te estás refiriendo al pasado? Si es así, debo recordarte que todavía eras una niña cuando los oficiales de Rathenow iban a vuestra casa.

—Podría contestarte que los niños son los mejores observadores. Pero no lo haré, no tiene ningún sentido. Lo que quiero saber ahora es cómo están tus ojos, mamá.

Entonces la señora Von Briest explicó que el oculista le había diagnosticado una congestión cerebral, que era lo que provocaba que la vista se le nublara. Le había prescrito una dieta en la que debía suprimir la cerveza, el café y el té, lo cual, junto con alguna sangría puntual, haría que pronto mejorase.

—Eso me lo dijo hará unos quince días. Pero ya me conozco yo las previsiones de los médicos: quince días quiere decir unas seis semanas, y todavía estaré aquí cuando llegue Innstetten para instalaros en vuestra nueva casa. No te diré que eso me desagrade, y es lo único que me consuela del largo tratamiento que sin duda me espera. Lo más importante es que encontréis algo verdaderamente bonito. Yo había

pensado en Landgrafenstrasse o en Keithstrasse, que son lugares elegantes y no demasiado caros. Lo cierto es que tendréis que administraros bien. El cargo de Innstetten es muy distinguido, pero no supone unos grandes ingresos. Briest se queja también. Los precios están cayendo y cada día me explica que si no se ponen aranceles proteccionistas tendrá que abandonar Hohen-Cremmen e irse a mendigar. Ya sabes que le gusta exagerar. En fin… Dagobert, sírvete y luego cuéntanos alguna historia divertida. Los relatos sobre achaques son siempre aburridos, y los que nos quieren nos escuchan porque no tienen más remedio. A Effi también le encantaría escuchar alguna historia graciosa de esas revistas, las *Fliegende Blätter* o *Kladderadatsch*, aunque por lo que dicen ya no son tan buenas como antes.

—¡Oh, no, siguen siendo muy buenas! Salen Strudelwit y Prudelwit, y sólo con eso ya habría suficiente.

—Mis personajes favoritos son Karlchen Miessnick y Wippchen von Bernau.

—Sí; son los mejores. Pero Wippchen, y perdona que te corrija, querida prima, no es un personaje de *Kladderadatsch*… Wippchen ya no pinta nada actualmente, porque no estamos en guerra. Por desgracia. Hay gente a la que nos gustaría tener la oportunidad de poder cubrir este horrible vacío —dijo, pasando un dedo por el espacio comprendido entre el ojal y el hombro de su guerrera.

—¡Bah, eso no es más que vanidad! Más vale que nos expliques algún chiste. ¿Cuáles son los que se estilan ahora?

—Pues un tipo de chascarrillo muy peculiar, y que no gusta a todo el mundo. Se trata de los chistes bíblicos.

—¿Los chistes bíblicos? ¿Qué quieres decir…? La Biblia y los chistes no parecen casar muy bien.

—Por eso he dicho que no son del gusto de todos. Pero, resulten admisibles o no, lo cierto es que están muy en boga. Una moda pasajera, como los huevos de chorlito.

—Pues bien, si no resulta demasiado atrevido, cuéntanos uno como muestra, ¿vale?

—Desde luego. Y hasta diría que este lo vas a adivinar. Lo que más se lleva ahora son unos chistes muy sutiles e inteligentes, basados en asociaciones y juegos de palabras. La pregunta, ya que todos estos chistes se plantean en forma de pregunta, es de lo más sencilla: «¿Quién fue el primer cochero?». Adivínalo.

—Pues tal vez Apolo.

—Muy buen intento. Eres un lince, Effi. A mí no se me hubiera ocurrido. Pero no lo has acertado.

—¿Y entonces quién fue?

—El primer cochero fue «Dolor», porque ya en el libro de Job se dice: «No me dejaré llevar por el dolor».

Effi repetía la frase moviendo la cabeza sin lograr encontrarle la gracia, y es que pertenecía a esa privilegiada clase de personas que carecen por completo del sentido para deleitarse con juegos de palabras. Y el primo Briest se vio en la nada airosa situación de tener que explicar el chiste.

—¡Ah, ahora lo entiendo! Perdona que haya tardado tanto en pillarlo, pero es que me parece bastante estúpido.

—Sí, un poco sí lo es —dijo Dagobert un tanto avergonzado.

—Estúpido y de mal gusto, y capaz de hacer que se le quiten a una las ganas de venir a Berlín. Se marcha una de Kessin por volver a estar entre gente civilizada, y lo primero que escucha es un chiste bíblico. Mamá tampoco dice nada, y su silencio es de por sí bastante elocuente. Pero quiero facilitarte una honrosa retirada…

—Sí, prima, por favor.

—… facilitarte una honrosa retirada y tomarme como un buen augurio que lo primero que mi primo Dagobert me ha dicho al llegar aquí haya sido: «No me dejaré llevar por el dolor». Es curioso, primo, pero, por muy malo que sea el chiste, no sabes cómo te lo agradezco.

Dagobert, después de salir del atolladero en que se había metido, intentó hacer broma del tono solemne que había adoptado su prima, pero lo dejó estar al observar que esto también la contrariaba.

Poco después de las diez, el primo se despidió con la promesa de volver al día siguiente para ponerse a disposición de las damas.

Y en cuanto se hubo marchado, Effi se retiró a sus dependencias.

Al día siguiente hacía un día precioso, y madre e hija salieron muy temprano para ir en primer lugar a la clínica oftalmológica, donde Effi aguardó en la sala de espera y se entretuvo hojeando unas revistas. Luego se dirigieron hacia el Tiergarten y llegaron hasta las inmediaciones del jardín zoológico con el fin de buscar una casa en los alrededores. Y dio la casualidad de que en la Keithstrasse, que era lo que desde un principio habían deseado, encontraron un apartamento bastante aceptable, aunque estaba en un edificio de construcción reciente, aún bastante húmedo y al que le faltaban algunos detalles por acabar.

—No os conviene, Effi —dijo la señora Von Briest—. En primer lugar, por simples razones de salud; y luego, porque un consejero ministerial no puede dedicarse a secar paredes.

Aunque el apartamento le gustaba bastante, Effi se mostró de acuerdo con estas objeciones porque no tenía ningún interés en resolver tan rápidamente el tema, más bien al contrario. Su objetivo era «ganar tiempo a toda costa», y postergar cualquier tipo de decisión era lo mejor que podía hacer.

—De todos modos, mamá, no debemos descartar esta casa. Está muy bien situada y se parece bastante a lo que ando buscando.

Las dos señoras cogieron un coche para regresar al centro de la ciudad y comieron en un restaurante que les habían recomendado. Por la noche asistieron a la ópera, lo cual había autorizado el doctor a condición de que la señora Von Briest escuchara más que mirara.

Los días siguientes transcurrieron de modo parecido. Ambas se sentían muy felices de volver a estar juntas y de poder conversar a sus anchas después de tanto tiempo sin hacerlo. Y Effi, que no sólo sabía escuchar y contar cosas, sino que cuando estaba de buen humor tenía una lengua muy afilada, se mostró en más de una ocasión francamente animada. La madre escribió a casa expresando su felicidad por encontrar de nuevo a la «niña» tan alegre y con tantas ganas de reír. Era como revivir aquellos felices días que habían pasado en Berlín hacía casi dos años, cuando preparaban el ajuar, y también el primo Briest seguía siendo el de siempre. Y así era, salvo que ahora se dejaba ver con menos asiduidad que antes, y a la pregunta de «¿Por qué?» solía responder, sin asomo de ironía: «Porque eres demasiado peligrosa para mí, prima». Esto provocaba siempre las risas de madre e hija, y Effi le respondía:

—Dagobert, sin duda eres aún muy joven, pero no lo bastante para seguir cortejándome de ese modo.

De esta manera habían transcurrido casi dos semanas. Innstetten escribía cartas cada vez más apremiantes y con comentarios bastante mordaces, dirigidos incluso a la madre política. Effi comprendió que no era posible seguir dando largas al asunto y que tenía que decidirse ya a alquilar algo. Pero ¿y después qué? Faltaban todavía tres semanas para la mudanza a Berlín, pero Innstetten le insistía en que regresara cuanto antes. Así pues, el único recurso que le quedaba era representar una nueva farsa: hacerse la enferma.

Encontró muchas razones en contra de aquello, pero no había más remedio; y en cuanto se convenció, se dispuso a representar su papel hasta en los más mínimos detalles.

—Mamá, ya ves que Innstetten se está poniendo cada vez más susceptible a causa de mi tardanza. Así que habrá que ceder y alquilar algo hoy mismo. Mañana volveré a Kessin. ¡Ah, no sabes lo difícil que se me hará volver a separarme de ti!

La señora Von Briest se mostró de acuerdo.

—¿Y qué casa quieres alquilar?

—La primera, naturalmente, la de Keithstrasse, aquella que desde un principio me gustó tanto, y a ti también. Puede que aún no se haya secado del todo, pero pronto llegará el verano, lo que en cierto punto es un consuelo. Y si el problema de la humedad resulta demasiado molesto y me da un poco de reuma, siempre puedo ir a Hohen-Cremmen.

—Hija mía, no llames al mal tiempo. El reuma se puede coger de la noche a la mañana, sin saber cómo.

Esas palabras de su madre le llegaron a Effi como caídas del cielo. Esa misma mañana alquiló el apartamento y escribió a Innstetten diciéndole que volvería al día siguiente. A continuación se hicieron las maletas y todos los demás preparativos. Pero, cuando se despertó por la mañana, Effi mandó llamar a su madre a la cabecera de la cama y le dijo:

—Mamá, no puedo viajar. Siento mucho dolor y me dan como punzadas por toda la espalda. Puede que se trate de reuma. Nunca me hubiera imaginado que fuera tan doloroso.

—¿Lo ves? ¡Lo que te había dicho! No se debe llamar al mal tiempo… Ayer mismo hablabas del reuma con tanta ligereza, y hoy ya lo tienes. En cuanto vea a Schweigger le preguntaré qué tienes que hacer.

—No, a Schweigger no. Él es un médico especialista, y hasta podría ofenderse si le consultas sobre algo que no sea de su especialidad. Creo que lo mejor será que esperemos. Puede que se me vaya solo. Me pasaré todo el día a base de té y soda, y si eso me hace sudar bastante tal vez se me quite.

La señora Von Briest se mostró conforme, pero insistió en que debía comer algo. La dieta rigurosa, que antes estaba tan de moda, era absolutamente equivocada, ya que no hacía más que debilitar. En ese aspecto se mostraba partidaria de la nueva escuela: había que alimentarse bien.

Effi obtuvo no poco consuelo de esta opinión de su madre. Hizo enviar un telegrama a Innstetten, diciéndole que se había producido un «lamentable incidente» y que sólo se trataba de un impedimento fastidioso, aunque momentáneo. Luego llamó a Roswitha.

—Tendrás que ir a buscarme algunos libros —le dijo—. No te será difícil. Quiero libros antiguos, muy

antiguos.

—Muy bien, señora. La biblioteca pública está muy cerca. ¿Qué quiere que le traiga?

—Te anotaré unos cuantos para que puedas elegir. A veces ocurre que no tienen precisamente lo que buscas.

Roswitha trajo lápiz y papel. Effi escribió: «Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe* o *Quentin Durward*; Cooper, *El espía*; Dickens, *David Copperfield*; Willibald Alexis, *Las calzas del señor Von Bredow*».

Roswitha leyó lo escrito y, una vez en la habitación contigua, cortó la última línea: le daba vergüenza, por ella y por su señora, enseñar la nota en su forma original.

El día transcurrió sin incidentes. A la mañana siguiente no se había producido ninguna mejoría, ni tampoco al tercer día.

—Effi, esto no puede continuar así. Cuando se te agarra un dolor como este, no te lo puedes quitar así como así. Los médicos siempre dicen, y con mucha razón, que estas cosas no se pueden ir dejando.

—Sí, mamá, pero ¿a quién llamamos? Sobre todo que no sea joven. No sé… me daría reparo.

—Con un médico joven siempre resulta algo vergonzoso, y si no es así, malo. Pero estate tranquila, iré a buscar a un doctor muy viejo, que me trató cuando aún estaba en el colegio Hecker, de lo cual hará más de veinte años. Por entonces debía de andar ya por los cincuenta, y tenía un cabello gris precioso, muy rizado. Estaba hecho todo un mujeriego, pero sabía comportarse dentro de los límites del decoro. Los médicos que no lo hacen así se hunden sin remedio; nuestras mujeres, al menos las de buena sociedad, saben muy bien lo que es correcto y decente.

—¿Tú crees? Me alegra mucho oírte hablar así. Y es que a veces se oyen cosas de todo tipo, y debe de pasarse muy mal. ¿Y cómo se llama ese viejo consejero? Porque supongo que se trata de un consejero privado, ¿no?

—Por supuesto. Se llama Rummschüttel. Effi rompió a reír alborozada.

—¡Rummschüttel! ¡Qué nombre tan agitado para un médico que trata a quienes no pueden moverse!

—Effi, te comportas de un modo muy raro para alguien que tiene tantos dolores.

—No, ahora mismo no tengo. Van y vienen.

A la mañana siguiente se presentó el consejero privado Rummschüttel. Fue recibido por la señora Von Briest, y cuando el doctor vio a Effi lo primero que dijo fue:

—Es clavada a su madre.

La señora Von Briest rechazó la comparación, alegando que más de veinte años eran demasiado tiempo, pero Rummschüttel se reafirmó en su opinión, asegurando que no recordaba todos los rostros, pero que cuando alguno le impresionaba se le quedaba grabado para siempre.

—Y ahora dígame, señora Von Innstetten, ¿qué le pasa? ¿Qué puedo hacer por usted?

—Ay, señor consejero, no sé cómo explicarlo. Es algo que va y viene. Ahora mismo no siento nada, es como si hubiera desaparecido. Al principio pensé que sería reuma, pero ahora diría que es una neuralgia, unos dolores que me bajan por toda la espalda y que me impiden incorporarme. Mi padre padece neuralgias, y he visto muchas veces cómo son. Tal vez lo haya heredado de él.

—Es muy probable —contestó Rummschüttel, que ya había tomado el pulso de la enferma y la había examinado discreta pero certeramente—. Muy probable, señora.

Pero lo que pensaba para sus adentros era: «Afección simulada, una actuación en toda regla, una hija de Eva *comme il faut*». Sin embargo, no dejó entrever nada, y con toda la seriedad que cabría esperar dijo:

—Lo mejor que puedo prescribirle en este caso es reposo y calor. Con esto y una pequeña medicina, por cierto nada desagradable, habrá bastante.

Y se levantó para escribir la receta: «*Aqua amygdalarum amararum*, media onza; *Syrupus florum aurantii*, dos onzas».

—Le ruego, querida señora, que tome media cucharadita de esto cada dos horas. Calmará sus nervios. Y me gustaría insistir en otra cosa: nada de esfuerzos, nada de visitas, nada de lectura.

Y al decir esto señaló el libro que estaba en la mesita de noche.

—Walter Scott.

—Ah, en ese caso no tengo nada que objetar. Lo mejor son los libros de viajes. Mañana me volveré a pasar.

Effi había estado muy bien y había representado maravillosamente su papel. Sin embargo, al quedarse sola —su madre había salido a acompañar al consejero—, se le encendió de pronto el rostro: acababa de caer en la cuenta de que el doctor había respondido a su comedia con otra comedia. Sin duda era un

hombre con gran experiencia de la vida, que se daba perfecta cuenta de todo pero sin dejarlo traslucir, tal vez porque sabía que a veces esas cosas había que respetarlas. ¿Es que no había comedias respetables, y acaso no lo era la que ella estaba representando?

Poco después volvió su madre, y ambas se deshicieron en elogios hacia aquel anciano tan distinguido que, pese a sus setenta años, conservaba todavía cierto aire juvenil.

—Envía a Roswitha ahora mismo a la farmacia… Pero sólo tienes que tomar la medicina cada tres horas, me lo acaba de decir ahí fuera. Siempre fue así: recetaba poco y en pocas cantidades, pero siempre remedios enérgicos que hacían efecto enseguida.

Rummschüttel volvió al día siguiente, y luego sólo cada tres días, porque veía la incomodidad que sus visitas causaban a la joven señora. Esto despertó la curiosidad del doctor, quien tras la tercera visita tuvo ya muy claro su diagnóstico: «Aquí está ocurriendo algo que obliga a esta mujer a actuar como lo hace». Y ya hacía mucho tiempo que había dejado de molestarse por quienes pretendían engañarlo en asuntos de este tipo.

Cuando Rummschüttel visitó a Effi por cuarta vez, la encontró sentada en una mecedora con un libro en la mano y con Annie a su lado.

—¡Oh, querida señora, cuánto me alegra verla así! No lo atribuyo a la medicina; el buen tiempo y estos días de marzo tan frescos y claros curan cualquier enfermedad. La felicito. ¿Y su señora madre?

—Ha salido, señor consejero, ha ido a la Keithstrasse para echar un vistazo al piso que hemos alquilado. Dentro de unos días llegará mi marido, a quien estaré encantada de presentarle en nuestra nueva casa cuando estemos instalados. Porque tengo la esperanza de que en el futuro continuará usted velando por mi salud.

El doctor hizo una reverencia.

—La nueva casa —prosiguió Effi— es de construcción reciente, y es algo que me preocupa. ¿Cree usted, señor consejero, que la humedad de las paredes…?

—En absoluto, señora. Haga que enciendan la calefacción durante tres o cuatro días, y deje las puertas y las ventanas abiertas. Luego podrá instalarse en ella sin temor alguno, bajo mi responsabilidad. Y por lo que respecta a su neuralgia, no tiene la menor importancia. Pero me alegro de que se muestre tan prudente acerca de su salud, ya que me ha permitido reanudar una antigua relación y ganar una nueva.

Repitió su reverente inclinación y, tras mirar a Annie a los ojos con una amable sonrisa, se despidió no sin antes pedir que diera muchos saludos a la señora Von Briest.

En cuanto salió por la puerta, Effi se sentó ante el escritorio y escribió:

Querido Innstetten:

Rummschüttel acaba de estar aquí y me ha dado el alta. Podría salir para Kessin mañana mismo, pero hoy ya estamos a día 24, y me dijiste que el 28 llegarías aquí. Aparte de eso, todavía me encuentro bastante débil y supongo que estarás de acuerdo conmigo en que lo mejor será que renuncie definitivamente al viaje. Además, todas nuestras cosas ya estarán de camino, y si yo fuera tendríamos que alojarnos en el hotel de Hoppensack como si fuéramos forasteros. También hay que tener en cuenta el tema de los gastos, que a estas alturas ya son considerables. Entre otras cosas habrá que pagar los honorarios de Rummschüttel, que confío en que continúe siendo nuestro médico. Es un anciano encantador. No pasa por ser un doctor eminente, y sus detractores y rivales lo califican de «doctor de señoras», aunque eso no deja de ser un elogio, ya que no todo el mundo es capaz de tratar con nosotras. No creo que el hecho de no despedirme personalmente de la gente de Kessin tenga mucha importancia. Ya estuve en casa de Gieshübler. La señora del comandante siempre me ha tratado de forma distante, casi grosera. Me falta despedirme del pastor, del doctor Hannemann y de Crampas. Saluda a este de mi parte. A las familias del campo ya les enviaré tarjetas. Los Güldenklee, según me escribes, están en Italia (no puedo ni imaginar qué esperan encontrarse allí), o sea que sólo me quedan las otras tres.

Excúsame lo mejor que puedas. Tú eres un hombre que domina los formalismos y sabrás encontrar las palabras precisas. A la señora Von Padden, con quien tanto simpaticé durante el baile de Fin de Año, tal vez le escriba yo misma para expresarle cuánto lo siento. Envíame un telegrama diciéndome si estás conforme con todo. Tuya siempre,

EFFI

Ella misma llevó la carta al correo, como si con ello pudiese acelerar la contestación, y al día siguiente a mediodía llegó el esperado telegrama de Innstetten: «Conforme con todo». Su corazón saltó de alegría. Bajó corriendo a la calle y se dirigió a la primera parada de coches.

—Al 1 C de la Keithstrasse.

El coche bajó por Unter den Linden y siguió luego por la Tiergartenstrasse hasta detenerse ante la puerta

de la nueva casa.

Arriba en el piso se amontonaban desordenadas las cajas con todas las cosas que habían llegado el día anterior, pero eso no la molestó. Al salir a la amplia balconada de mampostería, contempló, más allá del puente que cruzaba el canal, el gran parque del Tiergarten, cuyos árboles se erizaban ya de brotes verdes, y sobre él un claro cielo azul y un sol risueño.

Tembló de emoción y respiró profundamente. Luego volvió a entrar al piso, alzó la mirada y entrelazó las manos.

—¡Y ahora, con la ayuda de Dios, una nueva vida! ¡Una vida totalmente distinta!

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Tres días más tarde, casi a última hora, hacia las nueve, Innstetten llegaba a Berlín. En la estación le esperaban todos: Effi, la madre y el primo. El recibimiento fue muy cordial, especialmente por parte de Effi, y ya habían hablado de un montón de cosas cuando el coche de punto se detuvo ante la nueva casa de la Keithstrasse.

—¡Oh, has elegido muy bien, Effi! —exclamó Innstetten al entrar en el vestíbulo—. Ni tiburón, ni cocodrilo, y espero que tampoco ningún fantasma.

—No, Geert, todo eso se ha acabado. Ahora empieza una nueva etapa en nuestras vidas, y ya no tengo ningún miedo. Quiero ser mejor que antes y comportarme de forma más acorde a tu voluntad.

Todo esto se lo iba susurrando Effi al oído mientras subían por la alfombrada escalera al piso de arriba. La madre los seguía del brazo del primo.

Allí faltaban todavía algunas cosas, pero la impresión general resultaba muy acogedora, e Innstetten expresó su satisfacción:

—Effi, estás hecha un pequeño genio.

Pero esta rechazó cualquier elogio, y señaló a su madre como la única digna de alabanza. «Esto debe ir aquí», había ordenado una y otra vez de forma tajante, y siempre acertadamente, gracias a lo cual habían ahorrado mucho tiempo y el buen humor no había decaído en ningún momento. A última hora llegó también Roswitha para saludar al señor, y aprovechó la ocasión para decir: «La señorita Annie ruega que la disculpen esta noche», una pequeña broma de la que se sentía orgullosa y con la cual obtuvo el efecto deseado.

Luego tomaron asiento en torno a la mesa ya dispuesta y, tras servirse una copa de vino y brindar con todos por los «días felices», Innstetten tomó la mano de Effi y dijo:

—Pero, Effi, cuéntame, ¿cómo estás de tu enfermedad?

—Oh, no te preocupes por eso, ni siquiera vale la pena hablar de ello. Un poco de dolor y un gran fastidio, ya que sólo sirvió para alterar todos nuestros planes. Pero no ha sido nada serio, y ahora ya ha pasado. Rummschüttel ha sido de gran ayuda; creo que ya te dije por carta que es un anciano muy amable y distinguido. Según parece, no brilla por su ciencia, pero mamá dice que eso es una ventaja. Y, como en todo, debe de tener razón. Nuestro buen doctor Hannemann tampoco era ninguna lumbrera, y sin embargo siempre acertaba. Y ahora dime, ¿cómo están Gieshübler y todos los demás?

—¿Quiénes son «todos los demás»? Crampas me ha encargado que transmita a la señora sus saludos…

—Ah, muy atento.

—Y el pastor también te envía recuerdos. Tan sólo los nobles del distrito se mostraron bastante fríos, y parecía que me hicieran responsable también a mí de tu despedida a la francesa. Nuestra amiga Sidonie estuvo incluso sarcástica. La única que, cuando fui a verla anteayer a su casa, se alegró sinceramente de recibir tus saludos y tu declaración de afecto fue la buena señora Von Padden. Dijo que eras una mujer encantadora, pero que debía cuidarte mucho. Y cuando le respondí que me considerabas más como un «educador» que como un «marido», dijo en voz baja y como ausente: «Una corderita, blanca como la nieve». Y luego se calló.

El primo Briest soltó una carcajada.

—«Una corderita, blanca como la nieve…». Ahí lo tienes, prima.

Y quiso seguir tomándole el pelo, pero lo dejó en cuanto vio que Effi empezaba a enrojecer.

La conversación, que giró casi por completo en torno a las cosas de Kessin, se prolongó todavía durante un buen rato, y, por lo que iba contando Innstetten, Effi se enteró de que la única persona del servicio que se había declarado dispuesta a trasladarse a Berlín era Johanna. Esta se había quedado todavía en Kessin, pero llegaría dentro de unos días con el resto de las cosas. Innstetten estaba muy satisfecho de su decisión, ya que Johanna siempre había sido la más eficiente, y además poseía un aire muy de doncella de gran

ciudad. Quizá incluso demasiado. Christel y Friedrich habían dicho que eran ya demasiado mayores, y con Kruse ni siquiera se había planteado la cuestión.

—¿De qué nos serviría aquí un cochero? —concluyó Innstetten—. Coche y caballos son *tempi passati*, un lujo que no tiene ningún sentido en Berlín. Por lo demás, tampoco tendríamos sitio para la gallina negra. ¿O acaso subestimo las posibilidades que ofrece esta casa?

Effi negó con la cabeza y, después de una pequeña pausa, su madre se levantó y dijo que eran casi las once y aún le quedaba un largo camino. Insistió en que nadie la acompañara, ya que la parada de coches estaba allí mismo, una propuesta que fue naturalmente rechazada por el primo Briest. A continuación se despidieron, no sin antes quedar para verse a la mañana siguiente.

Effi se levantó muy temprano e hizo que dispusieran la mesa del desayuno cerca de la puerta abierta del balcón, ya que hacía una temperatura casi veraniega. Cuando Innstetten se presentó, ambos salieron juntos al balcón.

—¿Qué me dices ahora, Effi? Querías oír el canto de los pinzones del Tiergarten y el de los papagayos del jardín zoológico. No sé si querrán complacerte, pero ahí están. ¿Oyes eso? Viene de allí abajo, de ese pequeño jardín. No es exactamente el Tiergarten, pero casi.

Innstetten estaba maravillado, y tan lleno de gratitud hacia Effi como si hubiese conjurado todo aquello para él como por arte de magia. Luego se sentaron a la mesa y enseguida llegó Annie. Roswitha no dejó de insistir hasta que Innstetten tuvo que reconocer finalmente que la niña había experimentado un gran cambio en tan poco tiempo. Luego continuaron charlando sobre la gente de Kessin, las visitas que tendrían que hacer en Berlín y, finalmente, acerca del viaje que harían en verano, pero tuvieron que interrumpir la conversación para que Innstetten no llegara tarde a su cita.

Se encontraron según lo convenido en la confitería Helms, enfrente del Castillo Rojo. Visitaron varias tiendas, comieron en el restaurante Hiller y regresaron a casa a muy buena hora. Habían pasado un día muy agradable, e Innstetten se mostraba muy contento de volver a participar de la vida de la gran ciudad y sentir sus benéficos efectos. Al día siguiente, primero de abril, fue al palacio de la Cancillería para firmar en el pliego de felicitaciones al príncipe (prefirió actuar con prudencia y no hacerlo en persona), y luego se presentó en el ministerio. A pesar de ser un día muy ajetreado tanto a nivel social como oficial, su superior directo lo recibió muy amablemente y con muestras de gran deferencia. Le dijo que sabía que era un hombre de gran valía y que estaba seguro de que nada interferiría en su buen entendimiento y respeto mutuo.

También en casa todo iba de maravilla. Effi lamentó mucho que su madre tuviera que regresar a Hohen-Cremmen, después de que hubieran pasado, tal como ella había previsto, las seis semanas de tratamiento en Berlín, pero ese pesar se vio en cierto modo atenuado por la llegada, ese mismo día, de Johanna. Aquello le sirvió de algún consuelo, pues aunque Effi no se sentía tan unida a aquella linda rubia como a la muy abnegada y siempre alegre Roswitha, era igualmente apreciada tanto por ella como por Innstetten, ya que era muy hábil y eficiente, y además mostraba una actitud de lo más distante y reservada respecto al mundo masculino. Según los rumores que corrían por Kessin, los orígenes de la mujer podían remontarse hasta un importante personaje de la guarnición de Posewalk, jubilado hacía tiempo, lo cual explicaba su distinción, su hermosa cabellera rubia y su atractiva prestancia. La misma Johanna compartía también la alegría general que había despertado en todos su llegada, y se mostró conforme con seguir sirviendo como camarera y doncella de Effi, mientras que Roswitha, que en el plazo de casi un año había aprendido más o menos las artes culinarias de Christel, se haría cargo de la cocina. Annie quedaría al cuidado de la propia Effi, lo cual provocó las risas de Roswitha. Sabía muy bien de qué pie calzaban las jóvenes casadas.

Innstetten vivía enteramente dedicado al trabajo y a la casa. Era más feliz que en Kessin, porque no se le escapaba que Effi se comportaba de una manera más desenvuelta y alegre. Y eso se debía a que se sentía más libre. Aunque es cierto que el pasado seguía irrumpiendo en su vida de vez en cuando, ya no le producía miedo, y si lo hacía era de un modo fugaz y menos intenso, y todo aquello que aún temblaba en su interior estaba revestido de un encanto singular. En todos sus actos había algo de melancolía, como si quisiera pedir constantemente perdón, y hubiera sido feliz de poder manifestarlo abiertamente. Pero estaba claro que no le estaba permitido.

Cuando empezaron a hacer las visitas a principios de abril, todavía había vida social en la gran ciudad, pero la temporada estaba llegando a su fin y Effi no pudo participar prácticamente de ella. En la segunda quincena de mayo ya había acabado por completo, así que ahora se sentían incluso más felices cuando Innstetten salía al mediodía del ministerio y se encontraban en el parque del Tiergarten, o cuando por las

tardes iban paseando hasta los jardines del palacio de Charlottenburg. Mientras recorrían tranquilamente la gran explanada entre la fachada del palacio y la Orangerie, Effi no dejaba de contemplar las imponentes efigies de los emperadores romanos, encontraba un curioso parecido entre Nerón y Tito, recogía piñas caídas de los abetos, y luego caminaba del brazo de su marido hasta el solitario belvedere situado junto a la orilla del Spree.

—Dicen que antiguamente había fantasmas ahí dentro.

—No, sólo apariciones.

—Es lo mismo.

—A veces sí —dijo Innstetten—, pero de hecho existe una gran diferencia. Las apariciones suelen ser algo preparado, y eso es lo que al parecer sucedía aquí en el belvedere, o al menos eso me explicaba ayer mismo el primo Briest. En cambio, los fantasmas nunca son algo preparado, son algo natural.

—Entonces, ¿crees realmente en ellos?

—Desde luego. Esas cosas existen. Pero la verdad es que no acabo de creerme el que teníamos en Kessin. ¿Te ha enseñado ya Johanna su chino?

—¿Cuál?

—Pues el nuestro. Antes de dejar nuestra antigua casa, lo despegó del respaldo de la silla del piso de arriba y se lo guardó en su monedero. Se lo vi el otro día, cuando le pedí cambio de un marco. Y acabó confesando en medio de una gran turbación.

—¡Ah, Geert, no deberías habérmelo dicho! Ahora volvemos a tenerlo en casa.

—Dile que lo queme.

—No, no pienso hacerlo, y tampoco serviría de nada. Pero voy a pedirle a Roswitha…

—¿Qué vas a pedirle? Ah, ya entiendo… Ya me imagino lo que te propones. Quieres que compre una estampita con la imagen de algún santo y que la ponga también en su monedero. ¿No es eso?

Effi afirmó con un movimiento de cabeza.

—Bien, haz lo que quieras. Pero no se lo digas a nadie.

Al final, Effi decidió que lo mejor sería dejarlo correr, y hablando de todo un poco, principalmente de los planes para el viaje que tenían intención de hacer en verano, fueron en coche hasta la Grosser Stern, y desde allí caminaron por la Korso-Allee y por la Friedrich-Wilhelmstrasse hasta casa.

Habían planeado coger las vacaciones a finales de julio para viajar a los Alpes bávaros, donde precisamente ese año se celebraba la representación decenal de la Pasión de Oberammergrau. Pero todo se quedó en proyecto, ya que el consejero privado Von Wüllersdorf, al que Innstetten conocía de antes y que ahora era un estrecho colega suyo, enfermó de repente, e Innstetten tuvo que quedarse para sustituirlo. Hasta mediados de agosto no se restableció del todo, y sólo entonces pudieron emprender su viaje estival. Pero ya era demasiado tarde para ir al festival de Oberammergau, así que decidieron pasar sus vacaciones en Rügen.

—Primero, como es natural, iremos a Stralsund, de donde eran Schill, a quien ya conoces, y Scheele, a quien no conoces y que fue el descubridor del oxígeno, algo que no es imprescindible saber. Desde Stralsund iremos a Bergen y al Rugard, desde donde, según me ha dicho Wüllersdorf, se puede disfrutar de una magnífica vista de toda la isla. Y luego, atravesando las bahías de Jasmunder, la grande y la pequeña, iremos hasta Sassnitz. Porque ir a Rügen es en realidad ir a Sassnitz. Tal vez podríamos llegar también hasta Binz, aunque la playa de allí, y debo citar a Wüllersdorf una vez más, está tan llena de piedrecillas y conchas que casi no puedes bañarte, que es lo que nosotros queremos.

Effi se mostró de acuerdo con todo lo planeado por Innstetten, y especialmente con la idea de cerrar la casa durante unas cuatro semanas y enviar a Roswitha con Annie a Hohen-Cremmen. Johanna se iría a casa de un hermanastro, algo más joven que ella, que poseía un aserradero cerca de Pasewalk. Así todo el mundo quedaría aposentado. Salieron de viaje al comienzo de la semana siguiente, y esa misma noche llegaban a Sassnitz. La posada llevaba el nombre de «Hotel Fahrenheit».

—Espero que los precios sean Réamur —comentó Innstetten al leer el rótulo.

Y llenos de alegría y buen humor, antes de cenar, tuvieron tiempo de dar un paseo hasta la playa y los acantilados, y contemplaron desde el saliente de una roca la plácida bahía, sobre cuya superficie rielaba la luz de la luna. Effi estaba extasiada.

—¡Oh, Geert, esto es Capri, esto es Sorrento! Nos quedaremos aquí. Pero no en ese hotel, desde luego; los camareros son tan estirados que una no se atreve siquiera a pedir una botella de soda…

—Sí, están siempre encima de uno. Pero seguro que podremos encontrar alguna casa particular.

—Yo también lo creo. Mañana mismo buscaremos algo. Amaneció un día tan hermoso como la noche anterior, y la pareja desayunó al aire libre. Innstetten recibió unas cartas que debían ser contestadas enseguida, así que Effi decidió dedicar la hora que tenía libre a buscar un lugar donde alojarse. Fue paseando a lo largo de un prado vallado, y después de pasar junto a algunos grupos de casas y unos campos de avena, giró por un estrecho camino que bajaba hacia el mar. Al final del sendero, casi a pie de playa, había un pequeño hostal a la sombra de unas altas hayas. No era tan distinguido como el Fahrenheit, sino que se trataba más bien de una especie de posada, que, a aquella hora de la mañana, se encontraba totalmente vacía. Effi se sentó a una mesa desde donde disfrutaba de una espléndida vista, y apenas había tomado un sorbo del jerez que había pedido cuando se le acercó el dueño del hostal, quien, en parte por curiosidad y en parte por educación, entabló conversación con ella.

—A mi marido y a mí nos encanta este lugar —dijo ella—. ¡Qué vista tan magnífica sobre la bahía! No debe resultar fácil encontrar alguna casa por aquí…

—No, señora, será difícil…

—Pero la temporada ya está acabando…

—Aun así, aquí en Sassnitz seguro que no encontrarán nada. Pero más allá, siguiendo la playa, donde empieza aquel pueblecito cuyos tejados se ven relucir, tal vez encuentren algo.

—¿Y cómo se llama el pueblo?

—Crampas.

Effi pensó que no lo había oído bien.

—Crampas —repitió ella haciendo un esfuerzo—. Nunca lo había oído como nombre de lugar… ¿Y no habría otra cosa por aquí más cerca?

—No, señora, por aquí cerca no. Pero más arriba, hacia el norte, hay otros pueblecitos, y en el hostal que hay justo a la entrada de Stubbenkammer seguro que podrán informarles. La gente que tiene algo para alquilar suele dejar allí su dirección.

Effi se alegró de haber estado sola durante esta conversación, y cuando poco después dio cuenta a su marido de lo que había averiguado, cuidándose mucho de no mencionar el nombre del pueblo que colindaba con Sassnitz, Innstetten dijo:

—Bueno, si no hay nada por aquí cerca, lo mejor será que tomemos un coche, lo cual siempre queda muy bien en los hoteles, y nos acerquemos hasta Stubbenkammer. Allí tal vez podamos encontrar algún lugar idílico, alguna villa con su cenador rodeado de madreselvas. Y si no encontramos nada, siempre estará el hostal. Al fin y al cabo, tampoco habrá mucha diferencia.

Effi estuvo de acuerdo, y a eso de mediodía llegaban ya al hostal de Stubbenkammer mencionado por Innstetten, y allí mismo pidieron mesa.

—Pero para dentro de una media hora. Primero queremos dar un paseo y contemplar el lago Hertha. ¿Hay aquí algún guía?

La contestación fue afirmativa, y enseguida se acercó a nuestros viajeros un hombre de mediana edad, de aspecto tan grave y solemne que podría haber sido como mínimo un oficiante del antiguo culto a la diosa Hertha.

El lago, circundado de árboles altísimos, estaba muy cerca; sus orillas estaban pobladas de juncos, y sobre las aguas negras y quietas flotaban abundantes nenúfares.

—Todo aquí parece recordar el culto a Hertha —dijo Effi.

—Sí, señora… Y de ello son testigos las piedras.

—¿Qué piedras?

—Las piedras de los sacrificios.

Y mientras hablaban de todo esto, se dirigieron hacia una cercana muralla de guijarros y adobe, contra la cual había apoyadas unas losas finamente pulidas, todas ellas con una concavidad en el centro de la que salían varios surcos.

—¿Para qué servían esos surcos?

—Para que la sangre corriera mejor, señora.

—Vámonos de aquí —dijo Effi a su marido, y cogiéndose de su brazo regresaron junto al hostal, donde, en una mesa con unas magníficas vistas sobre el mar, les sirvieron el almuerzo que habían encargado.

La amplia bahía se extendía ante ellos bañada por la luz del sol y punteada por algunos veleros que surcaban sus aguas, mientras que en los acantilados las gaviotas se perseguían entre sí. Era un espectáculo ciertamente hermoso, pensaba Effi, pero entonces su mirada recorrió la centelleante superficie marina y divisó más allá, hacia el sur, los refulgentes tejados del pueblo cuyo nombre tanto la había inquietado aquella mañana.

Aun sin saber ni sospechar nada de lo que pasaba por su mente, Innstetten advirtió con toda claridad que del rostro de Effi había desaparecido todo rastro de alegría y buen humor.

—Lamento mucho, Effi, que no puedas disfrutar de toda esta belleza. Imagino que no puedes dejar de pensar en el lago Hertha y sobre todo en aquellas losas.

Ella asintió.

—Tienes razón. Y he de reconocer que nunca en mi vida he visto algo que me entristeciera tanto. Más vale que olvidemos la idea de buscar alojamiento. No podría quedarme aquí.

—Y pensar que ayer mismo decías que esto era como el golfo de Nápoles y que todo era tan hermoso…

—Sí, ayer.

—¿Y hoy? ¿Ya no queda ni rastro de Sorrento?

—Algún rastro sí, pero nada más. Es como un Sorrento que estuviera agonizando.

—Está bien, Effi —dijo Innstetten, y le tomó una mano—. No quiero seguir atormentándote con Rügen, así que más vale que lo dejemos correr. ¿De acuerdo? No hay nada que nos retenga en Stubbenkammer, ni en Sassnitz, ni tampoco más al sur. Pero ¿adónde vamos?

—En mi opinión, lo mejor es que nos quedemos un día más y esperemos el vapor, que, si no me equivoco, llega mañana procedente de Stettin y se dirige a Copenhague. Dicen que es una ciudad muy animada, ¡y no sabes las ganas que tengo de divertirme! Aquí tengo la sensación de que nunca más podré volver a reír, me siento como si no me hubiera reído en la vida, y ya sabes cuánto me gusta reír.

Innstetten se mostró muy comprensivo con el estado de ánimo de su esposa, sobre todo porque encontraba que en gran parte tenía razón. Por muy hermoso que fuera, todo aquello resultaba demasiado melancólico.

Así pues, esperaron el vapor de Stettin y al tercer día llegaron de madrugada a Copenhague, donde se alojaron en el Kongens Nytorv. Al cabo de dos horas ya estaban en el museo Thorwaldsen, y Effi exclamó muy animada:

—¡Oh, Geert, esto es precioso! Me alegro de que hayamos decidido venir.

Poco después regresaron al hotel, y durante la comida en la *table d'hôte* entablaron amistad con una familia de Jutlandia que estaba sentada frente a ellos, con una hija de extraordinaria belleza, llamada Thora von Penz, que despertó inmediatamente la admiración tanto de Innstetten como de Effi. Esta no se cansaba de admirar los grandes ojos azules y el rubio cabello tan claro de la joven, y, cuando al cabo de una hora y media se levantaron de la mesa, la familia Von Penz, que lamentablemente tenía que dejar Copenhague ese mismo día, expresó su esperanza de volver a saludar muy pronto a la joven pareja prusiana en el castillo de Aggerhuus (a unos tres kilómetros del fiordo de Lim), una invitación que los Innstetten aceptaron sin dudarlo un instante. De este modo tan agradable fueron pasando las horas en el hotel. Pero ahí no acabaron todas las cosas buenas que les sucedieron ese día tan memorable, del cual Effi llegó a afirmar que deberían marcarlo en rojo en el calendario. Para que la dicha resultase completa, por la noche asistieron a una función en el teatro Tívoli: una pantomima italiana con Arlequín y Colombina. Effi estaba como embriagada ante todas aquellas pequeñas picardías, y cuando ya muy tarde regresaban al hotel, dijo:

—¿Sabes, Geert? Me siento como si poco a poco volviese a ser yo misma. Qué te puedo decir de la hermosísima Thora… Pero cuando pienso además en que esta mañana he visto el museo Thorwaldsen, y luego la Colombina de esta noche…

—Que, en el fondo, te ha gustado aún más que el Thorwaldsen…

—Para serte sincera, sí. Qué quieres que te diga, me gustan estas cosas. En nuestra querida Kessin me sentía desgraciada. Allí todo me atacaba los nervios. Y en Rügen más o menos lo mismo. Creo que deberíamos quedarnos en Copenhague unos días más, haciendo por supuesto una excursión a Frederiksborg y Helsingör, y luego ir a Jutlandia. Me encantaría volver a ver a la bella Thora. Si yo fuera un hombre, me enamoraría de ella.

Innstetten se echó a reír.

—Aún no sabes lo que haré yo.

—No podría reprochártelo. Pero entonces se libraría una competición, y ya verías como yo también tengo mis armas.

—No hace falta que lo jures.

Y el viaje prosiguió tal como habían planeado. Una vez en Jutlandia, remontaron el fiordo de Lim hasta el

castillo de Aggerhuus, donde permanecieron durante tres días como huéspedes de la familia Von Penz. Luego, tras algunas paradas más o menos largas en Viborg, Flensburg y Kiel, regresaron al país por Hamburgo, que les gustó mucho, pero no fueron directamente a la Keithstrasse berlinesa, sino a Hohen-Cremmen, donde se proponían disfrutar de un merecido descanso tras el largo viaje. Para Innstetten este sería de muy pocos días, ya que se le acababa el permiso, pero Effi se quedó una semana más, y dijo que volvería a casa para el 3 de octubre, que era el aniversario de su boda.

A Annie le había sentado magníficamente el aire del campo y, tal como Roswitha había previsto, fue capaz de salir a recibir a su madre caminando con sus pequeñas botitas. Briest se mostraba como un abuelo afectuoso, advirtiendo contra cualquier exceso de mimo, pero aún más contra cualquier exceso de severidad, y seguía siendo en todo el mismo de siempre. No obstante, su afecto se dirigía especialmente hacia Effi, que ocupaba la mayor parte de sus pensamientos, sobre todo cuando estaba a solas con su mujer.

—¿Cómo encuentras a Effi?

—Tan dulce y buena como siempre. Nunca podremos dar suficientes gracias a Dios por habernos dado una hija tan encantadora. Y tan agradecida siempre por todo, y tan feliz de volver a encontrarse bajo nuestro techo.

—Sí —dijo Briest—. Y esta última virtud resulta para mi gusto algo excesiva. En realidad, es como si su hogar siguiera siendo este. Tiene un marido y una hija, y su marido es una joya y su hija es un ángel, pero aun así parece como si Hohen-Cremmen siguiera siendo lo más importante para ella, y que su marido y su hija no pudieran competir contra nosotros. Es una hija excelente, pero yo creo que lo es demasiado. Y eso me asusta un poco. Y además está siendo injusta con Innstetten. ¿Cómo están las cosas entre ellos?

—¿Qué quieres decir, Briest?

—Sabes muy qué es lo que quiero decir. ¿Es ella feliz? ¿O hay algo que se interponga en su felicidad? Desde un principio tuve la impresión de que sentía por él más respeto y admiración que amor. Y, a mi modo de ver, eso no es bueno. Puede que el amor no dure siempre, pero está claro que la admiración dura aún menos. En el fondo, a las mujeres las irrita tener que admirar a alguien: primero las irrita, luego las aburre y finalmente las hace reír.

—¿Lo dices por experiencia propia?

—No es eso. Y, además, en mi caso, nunca fui objeto de demasiada admiración. Pero deja de liarme, Luise, y dime cómo están las cosas entre ellos.

—Y dale, Briest, siempre a vueltas con lo mismo. Ya hemos hablado una docena de veces de ello y hemos intercambiado opiniones al respecto, pero tú sigues insistiendo a cada momento con esa manía tuya de querer saberlo todo, y haciendo unas preguntas terriblemente ingenuas, como si yo pudiera leer en las mentes. ¿Qué idea tienes tú de lo que es una joven casada, y más concretamente tu hija? ¿Crees que todo aflora a la superficie para que la gente lo vea? ¿O acaso te piensas que soy como aquel oráculo… ahora no me sale el nombre, y soy poseedora de toda la verdad en cuanto Effi me abre su corazón? ¿Y qué significa eso de abrir el corazón? La verdad siempre se queda dentro. Ella se guardará mucho de confiarme sus secretos. Además, y no sé de quién puede haberlo heredado, es una joven muy astuta, y esa astucia resulta más peligrosa si cabe en una personita tan encantadora.

—Entonces eso lo reconoces… que es encantadora. ¿Y buena también?

—Buena también. Tiene muy buen corazón. De todo lo demás, no tengo ninguna certeza. Creo que muestra cierta tendencia a considerar a Nuestro Señor únicamente en lo que tiene de bondadoso, no de justo, y se consuela con la idea de que no será demasiado severo con ella.

—¿Eso crees?

—Sí, lo creo. Por lo demás, me parece que muchas cosas han mejorado. Su carácter sigue siendo el que es, pero las circunstancias son mucho más favorables desde que se trasladaron, y cada vez se van compenetrando mejor entre ellos. Algo así me dijo ella, y lo más importante es que yo misma he podido constatarlo, con mis propios ojos.

—¿Y qué es lo que te dijo?

—Me dijo: «Mamá, ahora estamos mucho mejor. Innstetten siempre ha sido un marido excelente, un hombre como hay pocos, pero no lograba sentirme totalmente unida a él, siempre había algo de distante en él, como si fuera un extraño. Incluso cuando se mostraba más tierno le notaba distante. Ha habido momentos en que he llegado a sentir miedo».

—Conozco esa sensación.

—¿Qué quieres decir con eso, Briest? ¿Que se supone que yo he sentido miedo, o pretendes insinuar que has sido tú? Porque, en ambos casos, me parece una idea ridícula…

—Estabas hablando de Effi…

—Ya, bueno, pues me confesó que su sensación de extrañeza había desaparecido y que eso la hacía muy feliz. Me dijo que Kessin no había sido el lugar más adecuado para ella, con la casa con el fantasma y toda la gente de allá, algunos demasiado devotos, otros demasiado banales, pero que desde que se habían trasladado a Berlín se encuentra enteramente en su ambiente. Me dijo que Innstetten es el mejor hombre del mundo, quizá demasiado mayor y demasiado bueno para ella, pero que lo peor ya había pasado. Esas fueron sus palabras, y me llamaron mucho la atención.

—¿Por qué? No me parece tan desacertada… me refiero a la expresión. Pero…

—Aquí hay algo más. Y, en cierta manera, me lo ha querido dar a entender.

—¿Tú crees?

—Sí, Briest. Tú sigues pensando que ella sería incapaz de romper un plato. Pero te equivocas. Ella se deja llevar, y si la ola es buena, ella también lo es. Luchar y resistirse nunca han sido su fuerte.

En ese momento llegó Roswitha con Annie, y la conversación se interrumpió.

Esta conversación entre Briest y su esposa tuvo lugar el mismo día en que Innstetten dejaba Hohen-Cremmen para marcharse a Berlín, dejando que Effi se quedara allí al menos una semana más. Sabía que no había nada más grato para ella que poder abandonarse a sus sueños despreocupadamente, en un ambiente en el que era tratada entre algodones, oyendo sólo palabras amables y el reconocimiento expreso de todos sus encantos. Sí, eso era lo que más bien le hacía, y también en esta ocasión disfrutó de un pleno bienestar, a pesar de no contar apenas con distracciones. Las visitas eran muy escasas, ya que desde que se había casado la casa no ofrecía ningún tipo de atracción, al menos para la juventud, y ya ni siquiera las casas del pastor y del maestro representaban para ella lo mismo de antes. Sobre todo esta última estaba ya medio vacía. Las gemelas se habían casado en la primavera con dos maestros de las cercanías de Genthin, un gran casamiento doble muy sonado, que mereció los honores de una reseña en la *Gaceta de Havelland*. Hulda vivía en Friesack al cuidado de una anciana tía de la que esperaba heredar, la cual, como suele ocurrir en estos casos, demostraba una longevidad con la que los Niemeyer no habían contado. Aun así, Hulda seguía escribiendo unas cartas rebosantes de satisfacción, pero no porque se sintiese realmente feliz, sino para no dejar traslucir ninguna sospecha de que a una persona tan exquisita como ella la vida pudiera tratarla mal en modo alguno. Niemeyer, que era un padre débil, enseñaba las cartas con alegría y orgullo, mientras que Jahnke, que no vivía sino para sus hijas, se había hecho la ilusión de que ambas serían madres el mismo día, justamente la víspera de Navidad. Effi se rio con ganas y, después de expresar al abuelo en ciernes su deseo de ser la madrina de los dos nietos, dejó de lado los temas familiares y le habló de su viaje a Kjöbenhavn y Helsingör, al fiordo de Lim y al castillo de Aggerhuus, pero sobre todo de Thora von Penz, a la que no podía describir más que como la «típica escandinava», con sus ojos azules, sus cabellos de un rubio clarísimo y siempre llevando su corpiño de terciopelo rojo, una descripción que entusiasmó a Jahnke, quien no cesaba de repetir:

—Sí, así son: germánicos puros, mucho más alemanes que los alemanes.

Effi quería estar de vuelta en Berlín para el 3 de octubre, aniversario de su boda. Con el pretexto de que tenía que preparar y empaquetarlo todo para el viaje, la noche anterior se retiró a sus habitaciones a una hora bastante temprana. En realidad, lo que quería era estar sola; por más que le gustase charlar, había momentos en los que anhelaba un poco de calma y tranquilidad.

Las habitaciones que ocupaba en el primer piso daban al jardín; en la más pequeña dormían Roswitha y la niña, con la puerta sólo ajustada; en la más amplia, que era su dormitorio, Effi caminaba ahora de un lado para otro. Las ventanas estaban abiertas y el suave viento inflaba como velas las blancas cortinas, que en ocasiones caían blandamente sobre los respaldos de las sillas, hasta que una corriente más fuerte volvía a liberarlas. Había aún tanta claridad que se podían leer perfectamente las inscripciones de los cuadros de marcos dorados que colgaban sobre el sofá: *El asalto a Düppel, reducto V*, y al lado, *El rey Guillermo y el conde Bismarck en la cima del Lipa*. Effi sacudió la cabeza y sonrió. «La próxima vez que venga, pediré que pongan otros cuadros. No soporto estas escenas de guerra». Cerró una de las ventanas y se sentó junto a la otra, dejando una de las hojas abierta. ¡Qué sensación de bienestar sentía allí! Junto a la torre de la iglesia se alzaba la luna, que iluminaba el césped, el reloj de sol y los arriates de heliotropos. Todo estaba bañado por un resplandor plateado, y las franjas de sombra se alternaban con las de luz más clara, blancas como ropa tendida. Más allá se divisaban los altos arbustos de ruibarbo, con sus amarillentas hojas otoñales, y Effi recordó aquel día de hace poco más de dos años en el que jugaba allí con Hulda Niemeyer y las gemelas Jahnke. Luego había llegado la visita, había subido la pequeña escalera de piedra que había junto al banco, y una hora más tarde ya estaba prometida.

Se levantó, se acercó a la puerta y escuchó con atención. Roswitha ya dormía, y Annie también.

Y de pronto, mientras contemplaba a la niña, acudieron en tropel a su memoria toda suerte de imágenes de los días de Kessin: la casa del gobernador, con su fachada hacia la calle y su mirador con vistas a la plantación, y ella sentada tranquilamente en la mecedora; y entonces apareció Crampas, que se acercó a saludarla; y luego llegó Roswitha con la niña, y ella la cogió en brazos, la levantó en alto y la besó.

«Aquel fue el primer día; allí comenzó todo». Y mientras se abandonaba a tales recuerdos, salió de la habitación en que dormían las dos, se sentó de nuevo junto a la ventana y contempló la noche silenciosa.

«No puedo apartarlo de mi mente —se dijo—. Y lo que es peor, lo que más me desespera…».

En ese momento sonó el reloj de la torre y Effi contó las campanadas.

«Las diez… Mañana a estas horas ya estaré en Berlín. Y hablaremos de nuestro aniversario de bodas, y él me dirá palabras afectuosas y puede que hasta tiernas. Y yo allí sentada, escuchándole, con esta culpa sobre mi conciencia».

Y, apoyando la cabeza sobre una mano, se quedó abstraída, con la mirada perdida.

«Con esta culpa sobre mi conciencia —repitió para sí—. Sí, tengo este sentimiento de culpa, pero ¿realmente me pesa? No. Y eso es lo que me asusta de mí misma. Lo que me pesa de verdad es algo muy distinto: es el miedo, una angustia mortal, el temor constante de que todo se descubra. Y aparte del miedo… la vergüenza. Sí, me avergüenzo. Pero así como no tengo un auténtico sentimiento de remordimiento, tampoco lo tengo de verdadera vergüenza. Lo que me avergüenza son los engaños y las continuas mentiras. Siempre me he enorgullecido de no saber mentir y también de no necesitarlo, mentir es algo tan ruin… Y ahora he tenido que hacerlo a cada instante, ante él y ante todos, tanto en las cosas importantes como en las más pequeñas. Rummschüttel se dio cuenta y se encogió de hombros. Dios sabe lo que pensará de mí, seguro que nada bueno. Sí, me atormenta el miedo, y además la vergüenza por mis engaños. Pero no siento vergüenza por mi culpa, no la siento de veras, o al menos no lo suficiente. Y eso es lo que me mata. Si todas las mujeres son así, es algo espantoso; y si no lo son, cosa que espero de corazón, entonces es que mi caso es terrible, algo grave le ocurre a mi alma, a mi conciencia. Ya me lo dijo en una ocasión el viejo Niemeyer en sus buenos tiempos, cuando yo aún era una niña: “Lo más importante es la conciencia. Si esta es recta, siempre se puede evitar lo peor; pero si no lo es, se está en un constante peligro y lo que llamamos el diablo nos tiene en sus manos”. Dios misericordioso, ¿es eso lo que me pasa?».

Hundió la cabeza entre los brazos y lloró amargamente. Cuando se incorporó de nuevo, se sentía más tranquila y volvió a mirar hacia el jardín. Todo estaba en silencio, y sólo llegaba a sus oídos un suave rumor, como una fina llovizna, procedente de los plátanos.

Así transcurrió un rato. Luego, desde la calle del pueblo, resonó una voz chirriante: el viejo Kulicke, el sereno, cantaba la hora. Y cuando por fin calló, se oyó el lejano estrépito del tren que pasaba por Hohen-Cremmen, a unos tres kilómetros de distancia. El ruido fue apagándose hasta extinguirse finalmente, y sólo quedó la luz de la luna sobre el césped y el suave murmullo entre los plátanos, como si lloviznara.

Pero sólo era el aliento del aire nocturno.

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Al anochecer del día siguiente, Effi estaba de regreso en Berlín. Innstetten, acompañado de Rollo, fue a buscarla a la estación. Mientras atravesaban el Tiergarten charlando animadamente, el fiel animal iba trotando junto al coche.

—Ya creía que no cumplirías tu palabra.

—Pues claro, Geert, ¿cómo no iba a cumplir mi palabra? Eso es lo primero.

—No digas eso. Cumplir siempre la palabra dada es muy importante. Pero a veces no es posible. Acuérdate de cuando te esperaba en Kessin mientras tú estabas aquí alquilando la casa, y no volviste.

—Sí, pero aquello fue distinto.

No quiso decir «estaba enferma», e Innstetten no reparó en ello. Su mente estaba demasiado ocupada en cuestiones referentes a su cargo y a su posición social.

—Ahora, Effi, es cuando realmente comienza nuestra vida en Berlín. Cuando nos instalamos aquí en abril, la temporada ya estaba acabando y apenas tuvimos tiempo de hacer algunas visitas, y Wüllersdorf, que era el único conocido cercano, por desgracia, es soltero. A partir de junio todo queda en letargo, y las persianas bajadas anuncian a gritos: «Todo el mundo se ha marchado». Que luego sea o no verdad, eso es otra cosa. ¿Y qué nos quedaba entonces? Charlar un rato con el primo Briest o comer de vez en cuando en el Hiller no es hacer auténtica vida berlinesa. Pero a partir de ahora será diferente. He anotado los nombres de todos los consejeros que todavía están en edad de poder recibir en casa. Nosotros también haremos lo propio, y cuando llegue el invierno quiero que todo el mundo en el ministerio diga: «Sí, sin duda la mujer de Innstetten es la dama más adorable que tenemos ahora en la ciudad».

—¡Oh, Geert, no te reconozco! Hablas como si fueras un galante admirador.

—Es nuestro aniversario de bodas, y creo que es algo que me debes consentir.

Innstetten estaba seriamente decidido a sustituir la apacible vida de gobernador que hasta entonces había llevado por una vida social más animada, tanto por su propia conveniencia como, sobre todo, por consideración a Effi. Al principio sólo fue posible hacerlo de manera esporádica, ya que la verdadera temporada no había empezado propiamente, y al igual que durante los seis meses anteriores la vida social se limitó a pequeñas reuniones en casa. Wüllersdorf iba con frecuencia, y también el primo Briest, y cuando estos se presentaban avisaban a los Gizicki, un joven matrimonio que vivía en el piso de arriba. Gizicki era juez de primera instancia, y su inteligente y avispada esposa era una Von Schmettau. A veces ponían música y durante un tiempo jugaron al *whist*, pero decidieron dejarlo porque la charla les resultaba más agradable. Los Gizicki habían vivido hasta hacía poco en una pequeña ciudad de la Alta Silesia, y Wüllersdorf, quien hacía ya bastantes años había sido destinado a los más remotos rincones de la provincia de Posen, solía recitar con tanta delectación como énfasis la conocida copla festiva:

Mala es la ciudad de Schrimm,
peor aún la de Rogasen,
pero aunque me lo rogasen,
a Samter nunca he de ir.

A nadie le divertía esto tanto como a Effi, y generalmente daba pie a explicar todo tipo de anécdotas provincianas. También a menudo le llegaba el turno a Kessin, con Gieshübler y la Trippelli, el guardabosques Ring y Sidonie von Grasenabb, y, cuando se animaba, a Innstetten no había quien lo parara.

—Sí —dijo en una ocasión—, ¡nuestra buena Kessin! He de reconocer que en ella abundaban los personajes curiosos, comenzando por Crampas, el comandante Crampas, todo un dandi con pinta de

Barbarroja, a quien mi esposa, no sé si de manera comprensible o incomprensible, tenía en gran estima…

—Digamos que de manera comprensible —intervino Wüllersdorf—, ya que, según tengo entendido, era el presidente del casino e interpretaba comedias en las que hacía tanto el papel de galán enamorado como el de *bonvivant*. Y si se terciaba, hasta el de tenor.

Innstetten confirmó todo esto, y Effi procuró salir del apuro sumándose con sus risas al regocijo general, aunque haciendo un gran esfuerzo, y cuando los invitados se marcharon e Innstetten se retiró a su habitación para acabar de revisar algunos documentos, ella volvió a sentirse atormentada por los viejos recuerdos y le pareció como si una sombra la persiguiera.

Estos temores no la abandonaron, pero eran cada vez menos frecuentes y más débiles, lo cual no era de extrañar dado el nuevo rumbo que estaba tomando su vida. El afecto con que la trataban no sólo Innstetten, sino también personas hasta entonces desconocidas, y especialmente la amistad casi efusiva que le demostraba la joven esposa del ministro, iban atenuando los miedos y angustias de otros tiempos. Y cuando al año siguiente la emperatriz eligió a «la consejera ministerial» como dama de honor en la inauguración de una de sus nuevas fundaciones benéficas, y cuando en el baile de la corte el viejo káiser Guillermo le dirigió unas amables y graciosas palabras a la joven y hermosa señora «de la que tanto he oído hablar», se comprende que todos sus temores del pasado prácticamente desaparecieran. Aquello había sucedido, pero quedaba ya lejos, muy lejos, como en otro planeta, y todo se iba desvaneciendo como entre brumas hasta convertirse en un sueño.

Sus padres venían a visitarles de vez en cuando desde Hohen-Cremmen, y se sentían muy dichosos de la felicidad de los hijos. Annie iba creciendo —«tan bonita como su abuela», solía decir el viejo Briest—, y si alguna nube se cernía sobre el horizonte era la de que, al parecer, el matrimonio se conformaba sólo con la pequeña Annie, con lo cual la casa de los Innstetten (ni siquiera había primos que mantuvieran el apellido) estaba condenada a desaparecer. Briest, que no concedía mucha importancia a la continuidad de las otras familias, ya que en el fondo sólo le interesaban los Briest, se chanceaba a veces de ello:

—Si las cosas siguen así, querido Innstetten, Annie tendrá que acabar casándose con algún banquero (esperemos que sea un banquero cristiano, si es que para entonces queda todavía alguno) para que, en consideración a la vieja dinastía de los barones de Innstetten, Su Majestad permita que los hijos de la *haute finance* de Annie continúen figurando en el *Almanaque de Gotha*, o, lo que es menos importante, en la historia de Prusia, como «hijos de la baronesa Innstetten».

Estos comentarios eran acogidos por Innstetten con una cierta perplejidad, y con un encogimiento de hombros por parte de la señora Von Briest, mientras que a Effi la divertían, ya que su orgullo de nobleza no iba más allá de su propia persona, y la idea de tener un yerno banquero, elegante y mundano, y sobre todo rico, muy rico, no era algo que se alejara mucho de sus deseos para el futuro.

Lo cierto es que a Effi, como a cualquier mujer joven y encantadora, no le preocupaba mucho la cuestión de la sucesión. Pero, después de transcurrido un tiempo considerable —llevaban ya siete años instalados en Berlín—, la señora Von Briest llamó finalmente a consulta al anciano Rummschüttel, quien no dejaba de tener cierta reputación en el campo de la ginecología. Recomendó una cura en Schwalbach, pero como desde el último invierno Effi venía padeciendo algunas afecciones catarrales, e incluso la había auscultado varias veces para descartar cualquier enfermedad pulmonar, la decisión final del doctor fue: «Entonces, querida señora, empezaremos por Schwalbach, pongamos unas tres semanas, y luego otras tres semanas en Ems. Durante la cura en Ems, el señor consejero podrá acompañarla. Más no puedo hacer por usted, querido Innstetten».

Todos se mostraron conformes, y más tarde se decidió que Effi haría el viaje en compañía de la esposa del consejero privado Zwicker, «para protegerla», como dijo Briest, y no andaba del todo desencaminado, ya que la señora Zwicker, a pesar de sus más de cuarenta años, estaba mucho más necesitada de protección que Effi. Innstetten, que volvía a estar ocupadísimo cubriendo la ausencia de algunos colegas, lamentaba no poder pasar unos días con su esposa no sólo en Schwalbach, lo cual era del todo imposible, sino probablemente tampoco en Ems. Se fijó la partida para el 24 de junio, día de San Juan, y Roswitha ayudó a la señora a empaquetar y hacer la lista de la ropa blanca. Effi continuaba profesándole el mismo afecto de siempre, ya que Roswitha era la única persona con la cual podía hablar abiertamente del pasado: de Kessin y de Crampas, del chino y de la sobrina del capitán Thomsen.

—Dime, Roswitha, tú que eres católica, ¿no vas nunca a confesarte?

—No, señora.

—¿Y por qué?

—Antes solía ir. Pero nunca decía las cosas importantes.

—Eso está muy mal. Porque entonces no sirve de nada.

—Ah, señora, en la aldea todos hacían lo mismo. Había gente que incluso lo hacía sólo para reírse.

—¿Nunca has pensado que en el fondo es algo bueno, poder descargarte de algo que te pesa sobre la conciencia?

—No, señora. Tuve mucho miedo cuando mi padre se abalanzó sobre mí con un hierro ardiendo. Entonces sí que sentí miedo, pero nada más.

—¿Y miedo de Dios?

—No mucho, señora. Cuando le has tenido tanto miedo a tu padre como le tuve yo al mío, ya no temes tanto a Dios. Siempre he pensado que Nuestro Señor es bueno y que a mí, pobre infeliz, ya me ayudará.

Effi sonrió y abandonó el tema, pensando que era muy natural que la pobre Roswitha hablase de ese modo. Pero al cabo de un momento añadió:

—Roswitha, cuando regrese tendremos que volver a hablar seriamente de este asunto. En realidad fue un pecado muy grave.

—¿Lo del niño y lo de que se muriese de hambre? Sí que lo fue, señora. Pero no fue culpa mía, sino de los demás… Y además hace mucho tiempo.



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Effi llevaba ya unas cinco semanas fuera y escribía unas cartas alegres, casi eufóricas, muy especialmente desde que llegó a Ems, donde según contaba podía tratar por fin con gente, es decir, con hombres, de los cuales en Schwalbach sólo se veían raros ejemplares. Explicaba que la señora Zwicker, su compañera de viaje, había planteado seriamente la cuestión de si semejante aditamento sería beneficioso para la cura, y se había pronunciado decididamente en contra, aunque con un tono y una expresión que sugerían lo contrario. Según escribía Effi, la señora Zwicker era una mujer encantadora y algo liberal, que seguramente tenía un pasado, pero que era muy divertida y se podía aprender mucho de ella; nunca, a pesar de sus veinticinco años, se había sentido tan criatura como después de haber conocido a esta dama. Era además una mujer muy leída, incluso en literatura extranjera, y cuando Effi le había preguntado recientemente si *Naná* era en verdad tan terrible, la señora Zwicker le había contestado: «Ay, mi querida baronesa, ¿qué entiende usted por terrible? Ahí lo que hay son otras cosas». «Y parecía dispuesta —concluía Effi su carta— a darme a conocer esas "otras cosas", pero yo me negué, porque sé que tú atribuyes a todo eso la inmoralidad de nuestra época, y es probable que tengas razón. Pero no me resultó fácil. Por lo demás, Ems se encuentra en un valle cerrado y estamos pasando un calor espantoso».

Innstetten había leído la carta con sentimientos encontrados: en parte le divertía, pero también le ponía de mal humor. La señora Zwicker no era mujer que conviniese a Effi, quien tenía inclinación a apartarse del buen camino. Sin embargo, renunció a escribirle en tal sentido, en primer lugar para no contrariarla, pero sobre todo porque sabía que no serviría de nada. Mientras tanto, esperaba anhelante el regreso de su esposa. El tiempo en el despacho parecía hacérsele eterno y no dejaba de quejarse de la organización de su departamento, que le obligaba a hacer más horas que un reloj cuando los demás consejeros estaban fuera o a punto de marcharse.

Innstetten estaba ansioso por que se produjera una interrupción en su trabajo y en su soledad, y un sentimiento similar se vivía también en la cocina, donde Annie pasaba la mayor parte del tiempo después de volver de la escuela, cosa muy natural, ya que tanto Roswitha como Johanna no sólo querían muchísimo a la pequeña señorita, sino que seguían llevándose excelentemente entre ellas. Esta amistad entre las dos doncellas había llegado a convertirse en uno de los temas de conversación preferidos entre los asiduos de la casa, y el juez Gizicki le decía a veces a Wüllersdorf: «Esto no hace más que confirmar la sabiduría de la antigua frase: "Quiero tener a mi alrededor hombres gordos". César era un buen conocedor de la naturaleza humana y sabía que el *embonpoint* era garantía de un carácter plácido y un trato afable». Y tal cualidad podía atribuirse con toda propiedad a ambas criadas, con la diferencia de que la palabra extranjera, difícil de eludir aquí, era en el caso de Roswitha un eufemismo, mientras que en el de Johanna constituía una muy ajustada descripción. A esta no se la podía considerar como corpulenta, sino simplemente como una mujer rolliza, con unos ojos azules de franca mirada, un busto bien proporcionado y un aire de expresión triunfante que le sentaba muy bien. Con aquel porte tan digno y decoroso, estaba totalmente imbuida del orgullo de ser la doncella de una buena casa, y poseía en tan alto grado la conciencia de su superioridad sobre la rústica Roswitha, que cuando esta recibía en ocasiones algún tratamiento preferente, Johanna se limitaba a sonreír con condescendencia. Tal preferencia, si se la podía llamar así, no era más que un amable y pequeño capricho de la señora que bien se le podía conceder a la pobre Roswitha, con su eterna historia «del padre con el hierro ardiendo». «Cuando una se comporta como es debido, no le ocurren estas cosas», pensaba Johanna para sus adentros sin llegar a decirlo nunca. Así pues, era la suya una convivencia amistosa, pero lo que sobre todo mantenía la paz y la concordia entre ellas era el hecho de que, por un acuerdo tácito, se habían repartido el cuidado e incluso la educación de Annie. Roswitha se encargaba de las enseñanzas poéticas, de explicarle cuentos e historias, mientras que Johanna se ocupaba del tema de las buenas maneras. Era una distribución de tareas tan bien establecida que resultaba casi imposible que pudieran surgir conflictos de competencia, y a ello contribuía sin duda el carácter de Annie, ya que

mostraba una marcada inclinación a darse aires de señorita distinguida, para lo cual no podía tener mejor maestra que Johanna.

En resumidas cuentas, las dos mujeres eran a ojos de Annie igualmente valiosas. Pero en aquellos días en que todos se preparaban para el regreso de Effi, Roswitha había vuelto a cobrar cierta ventaja sobre su rival, ya que a ella le correspondía de pleno derecho todo el asunto del recibimiento y la salutación. Este se dividía en dos partes principales: la guirnalda y la corona, y luego el recitado de una poesía. Después de dudar un rato entre la «B» de bienvenida y las iniciales
«E. v. I.»,
la corona floral no había ofrecido finalmente demasiadas dificultades (se decantaron por la «B» trenzada con siemprevivas); pero la cuestión de la poesía resultaba más espinosa, y tal vez no hubiera llegado a solucionarse si Roswitha no hubiese tenido el coraje de abordar en la escalera al juez, cuando este regresaba del tribunal, para pedirle sin ambages que escribiera un «verso». Gizicki, que era un señor muy bondadoso, le prometió en el acto que se encargaría de ello, y aquella misma tarde le envió por medio de su cocinera una poesía que rezaba así:

Mamá, mucho tiempo hace que te esperamos;
han pasado semanas, días y horas,
y desde el portal y el balcón te saludamos,
tras tejer guirnaldas y coronas.
Papá ríe lleno de júbilo y desenfado,
pues el tiempo pasado sin esposa y madre
felizmente ha acabado.
También ríen Johanna y Roswitha,
y tu Annie salta de alegría
cuando exclama: «¡Mamá, bienvenida!».

Ni que decir tiene que Annie se aprendió la poesía de memoria aquella misma noche, no sin antes haber sido sometida a un examen crítico respecto al contenido de algunos versos. Lo de «sin esposa y madre», había declarado Johanna, podía parecer bien a simple vista, pero había algo en ello que podía resultar ofensivo para la señora, y en el caso de que ella misma hubiera sido esposa y madre se hubiera sentido molesta. Annie, un tanto preocupada por esta observación, prometió someter la poesía al día siguiente al juicio de su maestra. Al volver de clase, dijo que a la señorita le había parecido bien lo de «sin esposa y madre», pero que desaprobaba la mención a Johanna y Roswitha, a lo cual repuso esta última:

—La señorita es más tonta que un ganso, y eso le viene de haber estudiado demasiado.

Fue un miércoles cuando Annie y las dos doncellas sostuvieron esta conversación y dirimieron la disputa sobre la pertinencia o no de los versos. Al día siguiente por la mañana —todavía esperaban carta de Effi fijando la fecha definitiva de su regreso, que seguramente no se produciría hasta el final de la semana siguiente—, Innstetten se marchó al ministerio. Era cerca de mediodía cuando Annie, después de terminar las clases, volvía a casa con su cartera a la espalda, y tras pasar el canal y entrar en la Keithstrasse, se encontró con Roswitha delante de la casa.

—A ver quién sube primero la escalera —dijo Annie. Roswitha no quiso participar de tal competición, pero la niña empezó a subir corriendo los peldaños y, una vez arriba, tropezó con tan mala suerte que se golpeó en la frente con el limpiador metálico para quitarse el barro de las botas, que se encontraba junto a la escalera, y empezó a sangrar profusamente. Roswitha, que la había seguido jadeante, tiró con fuerza de la campanilla, y cuando Johanna apareció entró a la algo asustada niña en la casa y comenzaron a discutir sobre qué debían hacer.

—Deberíamos enviar a buscar al doctor… Lene, la hija del portero, ya tiene que haber vuelto de la escuela.

Pero desistieron de hacerlo porque aquello llevaría mucho tiempo, y había que hacer algo enseguida. Tendieron a la niña en el sofá y empezaron a ponerle compresas de agua fría. Esto le fue bien y comenzaron a recobrar la tranquilidad.

—Y ahora vendémosla —dijo finalmente Roswitha—. Todavía debe de andar por aquí aquella larga venda que la señora cortó el invierno pasado, cuando se torció el pie al resbalar en el hielo…

—Cierto, cierto —dijo Johanna—, pero ¿dónde puede estar…? Ah, sí, ahora que pienso, está en el

armario de la costura. Debe de estar cerrado con llave, pero no importa, la cerradura es muy sencilla. Vaya a buscar un punzón, Roswitha, y la haremos saltar.

Efectivamente, forzaron la cerradura, abrieron la tapa y empezaron a rebuscar en los anaqueles, sin que apareciese la venda.

—Estoy segura de que estaba aquí —exclamó Roswitha, contrariada.

Y mientras seguía revolviendo apresuradamente, iba dejando caer todo lo que cogía sobre la amplia tapa del armario: avíos de costura, acericos, bobinas de hilo, ovillos de seda, pequeños ramilletes de violetas secas, tarjetas, billetes y, finalmente, un pequeño fajo de cartas atado con una cinta de seda roja, que estaba al fondo del tercer estante. Pero la venda seguía sin aparecer.

En ese momento entró Innstetten.

—¡Dios mío! —exclamó Roswitha, volviendo muy espantada junto a la niña—. ¡No es nada, señor! Annie se ha golpeado con el limpiador de las botas… Dios mío, ¿qué dirá la señora? Aunque, después de todo, ha sido una suerte que ella no estuviera aquí.

Entretanto, Innstetten había retirado la compresa aplicada provisionalmente y vio que se trataba de un corte profundo, pero que no ofrecía peligro.

—No es nada grave, pero de todos modos habría que avisar a Rummschüttel. Lene puede ir a buscarlo, ahora debe de tener tiempo. Pero ¿qué diablos ha pasado con el armario de la costura?

Roswitha le explicó que habían estado buscando la venda, pero que no había manera de que apareciera y que lo mejor sería cortar una nueva.

Innstetten se mostró conforme y, una vez que las dos doncellas salieron de la habitación, se sentó al lado de la niña.

—Eres muy revoltosa, Annie, en eso te pareces a tu mamá. Eres como un torbellino, y nada bueno puede salir de eso, tan sólo algo como esto. —Y, señalando la herida, le dio un beso—. Pero no has llorado, y eso está bien. Así que, por esta vez, voy a perdonarte la travesura… Supongo que el doctor llegará dentro de poco. Haz todo lo que él te diga, y una vez que te haya vendado, no te toques la venda. De ese modo te curarás enseguida y cuando venga mamá ya no tendrás nada, o casi nada. Es una suerte que aún falte una semana. Acabo de recibir una carta suya en la que dice que no llegará hasta el final de la semana que viene. Te envía muchos recuerdos y dice que tiene muchas ganas de verte.

—¿Puedes leerme la carta, papá?

—Pues claro.

Pero, cuando se disponía a hacerlo, entró Johanna para anunciar que la comida ya estaba en la mesa. A pesar de la herida, Annie se levantó también, y padre e hija se dirigieron al comedor.

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Sentados uno frente al otro, Innstetten y Annie permanecieron callados durante un rato. Finalmente, cuando el silencio se tornó incómodo, Innstetten le hizo algunas preguntas acerca de cómo era la directora de la escuela y cuál era su maestra favorita. Annie respondió, pero sin mostrar gran entusiasmo, ya que notaba que Innstetten no prestaba mucha atención a sus palabras. La cosa no mejoró hasta después del segundo plato, cuando Johanna cuchicheó al oído de su pequeña Annie que tendría una sorpresa para después. Y en efecto, la buena de Roswitha, que en aquel día de desgracias deseaba hacer algo extra por su queridísima niña, había preparado un postre especial: una tarta con rodajitas de manzana.

A la vista del pastel, Annie se volvió más locuaz, y también el humor de Innstetten pareció mejorar cuando poco después sonó la campanilla y entró el consejero privado Rummschüttel. Su visita era puramente casual. Pasaba por allí y había subido a verles, sin tener ni idea de que hubieran ido a su casa a buscarle. Dijo que con las compresas de agua fría ya había suficiente.

—Haga que vayan a buscar un poco de agua de plomo, y que Annie se quede mañana en casa todo el día. Lo más importante es que repose.

Luego preguntó por la señora y quiso saber qué noticias había de Ems. Finalmente prometió volver al día siguiente para ver cómo seguía la herida.

Cuando después de levantarse de la mesa pasaron a la sala contigua, la misma en la que con tanto afán habían buscado en vano la venda, Annie volvió a tenderse en el sofá. Johanna vino y se sentó al lado de la niña, mientras que Innstetten se dedicó a volver a guardar en el armario de costura los innumerables objetos que habían quedado esparcidos en un confuso montón sobre la tapa del mismo. Cuando no sabía dónde colocar alguna cosa, se lo preguntaba a la doncella.

—¿Dónde estaban estas cartas, Johanna?

—Al fondo de todo, en ese anaquel.

Mientras recibía esta respuesta, Innstetten examinó con más atención el pequeño fajo atado con la cinta roja que, más que cartas, parecía contener pequeñas notas. Como si fuera una baraja de cartas, pasó el pulgar por el borde del paquetito y pudo entrever algunas líneas, más bien palabras aisladas. No reconoció la letra, pero tenía la impresión de que no era la primera vez que la veía. ¿Debería comprobarlo?

—Johanna, tráiganos el café. Annie también beberá media taza. El doctor no se lo ha prohibido, y lo que no está prohibido está permitido.

Mientras decía esto desató la cinta roja, y cuando Johanna salía de la habitación hizo deslizar rápidamente entre los dedos todo el contenido del fajo. Sólo dos o tres cartas iban dirigidas «a la señora del gobernador Von Innstetten». Ahora reconocía la letra: era la del comandante. Innstetten no tenía ni idea de que Crampas y Effi hubiesen mantenido ningún tipo de correspondencia, y en su cabeza todo empezó a dar vueltas. Se metió el paquetito en un bolsillo y se retiró a su habitación. Al cabo de unos minutos Johanna llamó suavemente a su puerta para anunciar que el café ya estaba servido. Innstetten respondió, pero eso fue todo. Después, se hizo un silencio total. Sólo después de un cuarto de hora le oyeron caminar de un lado a otro sobre la alfombra.

—¿Qué debe de pasarle a tu padre? —le dijo Johanna a Annie—. ¡Pero si el doctor ya le ha dicho que no era nada!

Aquel ir y venir por la habitación contigua parecía que no acabaría nunca. Finalmente, Innstetten salió y dijo:

—Johanna, cuide de Annie y procure que no se mueva del sofá. Estaré fuera una hora, tal vez dos.

Luego miró fijamente a la niña y se marchó.

—¿Has visto el aspecto que tenía papá, Johanna?

—Sí, Annie. Debe de haber tenido un serio disgusto. Estaba muy pálido. Nunca le había visto así.

Pasaron unas horas. El sol ya se había puesto y por encima de los tejados sólo se vislumbraba un resplandor rojizo cuando Innstetten regresó. Tomó la mano de Annie, le preguntó cómo se encontraba, y luego ordenó a Johanna que llevara la lámpara a su habitación, cosa que la doncella hizo enseguida. En la pantalla verde de la lámpara había unos óvalos semitransparentes con fotografías, una serie de retratos de Effi tomados en Kessin con motivo de la representación de *Un paso en falso*, de Wichert. Innstetten hizo girar lentamente la pantalla de izquierda a derecha y fue examinando una a una las fotos. Después se levantó, abrió el balcón porque la atmósfera le resultaba sofocante, y finalmente volvió a coger el fajo de cartas. Parecía como si, tras la primera ojeada, hubiera elegido algunas cartas y las hubiera colocado encima. Ahora las releyó en voz baja.

> Ven esta tarde a las dunas, te esperaré detrás del molino. Podremos vernos tranquilamente en casa de la vieja Adermann, que está bastante apartada. No tienes por qué estar tan asustada por lo nuestro. Nosotros también tenemos derecho. Y si te convences de ello, verás como desaparecen todos tus miedos. La vida no merece la pena ser vivida si hemos de obedecer unas normas que no son más que rígidas convenciones. Lo mejor está por encima de todo eso, y debes aprender a gozar de ello.
>
> … Escapemos juntos, me escribes. Eso es imposible. No puedo abandonar a mi esposa, y menos aún en la miseria. No puede ser, y hemos de aceptar las cosas tal como vienen; si no, estaremos perdidos. Lo mejor que podemos hacer es dejarnos llevar. Es el destino. Las cosas han venido así. ¿O acaso preferirías que hubiera sido de otro modo y no nos hubiéramos conocido nunca?

A continuación venía la tercera carta.

> … Te espero en el lugar de siempre. ¿Cómo voy a poder vivir sin ti? ¡Solo, en este apartado rincón del mundo! Me estoy volviendo loco, pero entiendo que en una cosa tienes razón: esta será nuestra salvación, y tal vez deberíamos bendecir la mano que nos condena a separarnos.

Innstetten acababa de dejar las cartas a un lado cuando oyó sonar la campanilla de la puerta. Al cabo de un momento, Johanna anunció:

—El consejero Wüllersdorf.

Cuando este entró, se dio cuenta enseguida de que algo grave sucedía.

—Perdone, Wüllersdorf —dijo Innstetten incorporándose para recibirle—, por haberle hecho venir a mi casa con tanta urgencia. No me gusta molestar a nadie por la noche, en sus horas de descanso, y menos a un consejero tan ocupado como usted. Pero no he tenido más remedio. Por favor, siéntese… ¿Un puro?

Wüllersdorf tomó asiento. Innstetten volvió a caminar arriba y abajo por la sala, y, dado el estado de inquietud que le consumía, habría preferido continuar haciéndolo, pero comprendió que no podía ser. Así pues, cogió también un puro, se sentó frente a Wüllersdorf y procuró serenarse.

—Le he hecho venir —empezó a decir— por dos razones: la primera, para transmitir en mi nombre un desafío; la segunda, para que sea mi padrino en el duelo. Lo primero no es nada agradable, y lo segundo lo es aún menos. Espero su contestación.

—Usted sabe, Innstetten, que estoy siempre a su disposición. Pero antes de entrar a fondo en la cuestión, permítame una pregunta ingenua: ¿es imprescindible? Ya no tenemos edad para estas cosas: usted para blandir una pistola, y yo para cargarla. Sin embargo, no malinterprete mis palabras como una negativa. ¿Cómo podría negarle algo? Pero ahora dígame, ¿de qué se trata?

—Se trata de un amante de mi mujer, un hombre que también era mi amigo, o eso parecía.

Wüllersdorf miró a Innstetten.

—Pero, Innstetten, eso no es posible.

—Es más que posible: es cierto. Tome, lea. Wüllersdorf echó un vistazo a las cartas.

—¿Están dirigidas a su esposa?

—Sí, las he encontrado hoy en su armario de costura.

—¿Y quién las ha escrito?

—El comandante Crampas.

—Entonces, ¿se trata de cosas que sucedieron cuando ustedes estaban aún en Kessin?

Innstetten afirmó con la cabeza.

—Así pues, hará ya unos seis años, o seis años y medio.

—Sí.

Wüllersdorf guardó silencio. Pasado un rato, Innstetten intervino de nuevo:

—Por lo visto, Wüllersdorf, esos seis o siete años parecen haberle causado una fuerte impresión. Naturalmente, existe una teoría de que ciertas cosas prescriben, pero no sé si podría aplicarse en este caso.

—Yo tampoco lo sé —repuso Wüllersdorf—. Y, francamente, debo reconocer que este parece ser el quid de la cuestión.

Innstetten le miró con los ojos muy abiertos.

—¿Lo está diciendo en serio?

—Totalmente en serio. No creo que sea el momento de entregarse a *jeux d'esprit* ni de entrar en sutilezas dialécticas.

—Tengo curiosidad por saber qué opina usted. Dígamelo con toda sinceridad.

—Innstetten, su situación es terrible y para usted la felicidad ya se ha acabado. Pero si mata al amante, su felicidad se habrá acabado doblemente, por decirlo así, ya que al dolor por el daño recibido se añadirá el dolor por el daño infligido. Todo depende de esta cuestión; ¿es absolutamente imprescindible? ¿Se siente tan herido, tan ofendido, tan indignado, que es preciso que desaparezca uno de los dos, o él o usted? ¿Es este el caso?

—No lo sé.

—Debe saberlo.

Innstetten se incorporó de pronto, se acercó a la ventana y tamborileó nerviosamente con los dedos en el vidrio. Luego se volvió hacia Wüllersdorf y dijo:

—No, no es el caso.

—Entonces, ¿cuál es?

—El caso es que me siento infinitamente desgraciado. He sido ultrajado, vergonzosamente engañado, y, pese a todo, no tengo ningún sentimiento de odio, ninguna sed de venganza. Y cuando me pregunto el porqué, la única explicación que encuentro es el tiempo transcurrido. Se habla siempre de una ofensa imperdonable, pero eso es totalmente falso: no lo es sin duda a ojos de Dios, ni tampoco a ojos de los hombres. Nunca hubiese creído que el tiempo, y sólo el tiempo, pudiera tener tal efecto. Y además hay otra cosa: quiero a mi mujer; sí, se me hace extraño decirlo, pero aún la quiero, y por terrible que me parezca todo lo que ha sucedido, sigo tan cautivado por su adorable encanto, por su alegría serena, que en lo más recóndito de mi corazón, aun en contra de mi voluntad, me siento inclinado a perdonarla.

Wüllersdorf asintió.

—Le entiendo muy bien, Innstetten, y seguramente yo haría lo mismo. Pero si esos son sus sentimientos y usted me dice: «Quiero tanto a esta mujer que puedo perdonárselo todo», y si además consideramos que todo esto queda lejísimos, como si hubiera ocurrido en otro planeta… en fin, si este es el caso, Innstetten, yo me pregunto: ¿por qué toda esta historia?

—Porque no puede ser de otro modo, debe ser así. Le he estado dando muchas vueltas. No somos sólo individuos, formamos parte de un todo mucho más amplio, y eso es algo que siempre debemos respetar, porque dependemos por completo de ello. Si fuera posible vivir aislado, la cosa podría quedar así. Entonces yo llevaría la carga sobre mis hombros y se habría acabado para mí la verdadera felicidad; pero son tantos los que viven sin esa «verdadera felicidad», que yo también podría hacerlo… y lo haría. No hay por qué ser feliz, eso es lo último a lo que se tiene derecho, y tampoco es imprescindible borrar de la faz de la tierra a quien nos haya arrebatado esa felicidad. No tienes por qué hacerlo, si decides vivir apartado del mundo. Pero en la vida social se han establecido unas leyes de convivencia que están ahí, y nos hemos acostumbrado a juzgarlo todo en virtud de esas normas, a juzgar a los demás y a nosotros mismos. Y contra eso no se puede hacer nada: la sociedad nos despreciaría, y al final nos despreciaríamos a nosotros mismos y no lo podríamos soportar, y acabaríamos volándonos la tapa de los sesos. Perdóneme por este discurso, que en definitiva no hace más que constatar lo que cada uno de nosotros nos hemos dicho infinidad de veces. Pero, claro, tampoco pretendo decir nada nuevo. Así pues, le repito una vez más: no se trata de odio ni de nada parecido, y tampoco quiero teñirme las manos de sangre por una felicidad que se me ha arrebatado; pero existe ese algo social que se puede decir que nos tiraniza y que no entiende de nada, ni de encantos, ni de amor, ni del tiempo transcurrido. No tengo elección. Debo hacerlo.

—Aun así, Innstetten…

Innstetten sonrió.

—Tiene que decidirse, Wüllersdorf. Ahora son las diez. Hace seis horas, lo reconozco, aún estaba en mi mano, aún podía elegir, aún tenía una escapatoria. Ahora ya no, estoy en un callejón sin salida. La culpa es mía, si lo prefiere así; debería haberme dominado, guardármelo todo para mí, debatirme en el fondo de mi

corazón. Pero todo ha sido demasiado repentino, me ha golpeado con tanta fuerza, que apenas puedo reprocharme no haber sabido mantener la calma y controlar mejor los nervios. Me dirigí a usted, le escribí una nota, y al hacerlo todo se me ha ido de las manos. Desde ese momento, ya había alguien que conocía en parte mi desgracia y, lo que es peor, la mancha que pesa sobre mi honor; y después de las primeras palabras que se han dicho aquí, ya hay alguien que la conoce del todo. Y, por esta razón, ya no puedo echarme atrás.

—Aun así… —repitió Wüllersdorf—. No me gustaría recurrir a la vieja frase trillada, pero no hay manera de expresarlo mejor: seré una tumba, Innstetten.

—Sí, Wüllersdorf, eso es lo que se dice siempre. Pero el secreto ya no existe. Y aunque fuera la discreción personificada y pudiera guardarlo ante los demás, usted ya lo sabe, y el que me haya dado la razón y me haya dicho que lo entiende no me protege contra usted. Desde este mismo momento, y ya no hay vuelta atrás, sería objeto de su compasión, algo que no es nada agradable, y cada palabra que me oyera intercambiar con mi mujer estaría sujeta a crítica. No podría evitarlo, y cuando mi esposa hablara de fidelidad o se dedicara a juzgar a otras, como acostumbran hacer las mujeres, usted no sabría dónde mirar. Y si al abordar uno de tantos casos de ultraje u ofensa del honor, yo adoptara una actitud benevolente «porque no ha habido voluntad de dolo» o por algo parecido, la sombra de una sonrisa cruzaría su rostro, o cuando menos sus labios se contraerían de forma involuntaria, y pensaría para sus adentros: «El bueno de Innstetten tiene una verdadera pasión por examinar todos los componentes químicos de los ultrajes, y nunca encuentra una cantidad de ofensa que resulte suficientemente dañina, porque a él nunca le daña nada…».

¿Tengo o no razón, Wüllersdorf?

Wüllersdorf se levantó.

—Me parece terrible que tenga razón, pero la tiene. No le atormentaré más con mi pregunta de si es absolutamente imprescindible. El mundo es tal como es y las cosas no pasan como queremos nosotros, sino como quieren los otros. La «justicia divina» que algunos invocan tan pomposamente es una tontería; por el contrario, nuestro culto al honor es toda una forma de idolatría, y mientras sigamos teniendo ídolos deberemos someternos a ellos.

Innstetten asintió.

El encuentro se prolongó durante un cuarto de hora más, en el que acordaron que Wüllersdorf debía partir esa misma noche en el tren de las doce.

Después se despidieron con un breve: «Nos vemos en Kessin».

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Tal como habían acordado, Innstetten partió a la noche siguiente en el mismo tren que Wüllersdorf había tomado el día anterior, y poco después de las cinco de la madrugada llegaba a la estación donde la carretera se bifurcaba a la izquierda en dirección a Kessin. Como siempre, durante la temporada estival, tras la llegada del tren salía el vapor ya tantas veces mencionado, cuyos primeros toques de sirena oyó Innstetten en el momento de bajar el talud de la estación. Tardó menos de tres minutos en llegar al embarcadero, subió al vapor y saludó al capitán, quien se mostró un tanto cohibido, por lo que supuso que el día anterior ya habría escuchado hablar del asunto. Innstetten ocupó su asiento cerca del timón, e inmediatamente el vapor soltó amarras. Hacía un tiempo espléndido, con un claro sol matutino, y había pocos pasajeros a bordo. Recordó el día en que regresó de su viaje de novios con Effi, sentados ambos en un coche abierto recorriendo la orilla del Kessine. Era un día gris de noviembre, pero nada enturbiaba la diáfana alegría de su corazón. Hoy en cambio era todo lo contrario: afuera hacía un sol deslumbrante, pero el gris de noviembre inundaba su corazón. Desde entonces, muchas, muchísimas veces había recorrido ese mismo camino, pasando junto a los campos rebosantes de paz, las fértiles tierras cultivadas amorosamente por los campesinos, el ganado que alzaba la cabeza con curiosidad a su paso… todo aquello despertaba en él un plácido sentimiento de bienestar; pero hoy, en marcado contraste, se alegró cuando algunas nubes empezaron a cubrir el risueño sol de aquel cielo claro. Continuaron navegando río abajo, y tras pasar la impresionante extensión de las aguas del Breitling, de pronto apareció ante su vista el campanario de Kessin, y poco después el baluarte y la larga hilera de casas con los barcos y botes amarrados frente a ellas. En cuanto atracaron, Innstetten se despidió del capitán y se dirigió a la pasarela tendida para facilitar el desembarque. Wüllersdorf le estaba esperando. Se saludaron sin mediar palabra, y cruzaron el muelle hasta el hotel de Hoppensack, donde se sentaron bajo un toldo de la terraza.

—Me alojé aquí ayer por la mañana —dijo Wüllersdorf, que no quería abordar el asunto inmediatamente—. Teniendo en cuenta que Kessin es poco más que un pueblecito, resulta sorprendente encontrar un hotel tan confortable. No me cabe duda de que mi amigo el camarero habla por lo menos tres idiomas, y a juzgar por el corte de su chaleco y por la raya del peinado, me atrevería a decir que hasta cuatro… Jean, por favor, tráiganos un café y un coñac.

Innstetten comprendía perfectamente por qué Wüllersdorf adoptaba aquel tono de ligereza, pero no lograba controlar del todo su nerviosismo y de forma casi involuntaria se sacó el reloj del bolsillo.

—Tenemos tiempo —dijo Wüllersdorf—. Aún falta casi hora y media. He pedido el coche para las ocho y cuarto. El lugar no está a más de diez minutos.

—¿Dónde es?

—Crampas propuso primero un rincón del bosque que hay justo detrás del cementerio. Pero enseguida cambió de opinión y dijo: «No, allí no». Y al final acordamos un lugar entre las dunas, muy cerca de la playa. Cruzando una de esas dunas, hay una pequeña garganta por la que se puede divisar el mar.

Innstetten sonrió.

—Al parecer Crampas ha escogido un bonito escenario. Sí, siempre le han ido mucho estas cosas. ¿Cómo se comportó?

—Magníficamente.

—¿Arrogante? ¿Frívolo?

—Ni lo uno ni lo otro. Debo reconocer, Innstetten, que me conmovió. Cuando pronuncié el nombre de usted, se puso mortalmente lívido, y aunque luchaba por mantener la compostura, no pudo evitar que le temblaran las comisuras de los labios. Luego se rehízo y mostró todo el tiempo una actitud de triste resignación. Tengo la convicción de que no espera salir airoso del trance, ni tampoco lo desea. Si no lo he juzgado mal, creo que es un hombre que ama la vida, pero al mismo tiempo la suya le es indiferente. Aprovecha todo lo que la vida le ofrece, pero también sabe que no vale gran cosa.

—¿Quién será su padrino? O, mejor dicho, ¿quién le acompañará?

—En cuanto recobró la compostura, esa fue su principal preocupación. Mencionó a dos o tres nobles de los alrededores, pero después cambió de opinión, comentando que eran demasiado viejos y piadosos, y dijo que enviaría un telegrama a Buddenbrook, un amigo de Treptow, quien por cierto ya ha llegado. Se trata de un hombre bastante peculiar, muy decidido y al mismo tiempo algo infantil, que estaba muy nervioso y no paraba de caminar de un lado para otro presa de una gran agitación. Pero cuando le expliqué de qué se trataba, dijo lo mismo que nosotros: «¡Tiene razón, así es como debe ser!».

Trajeron el café. Encendieron unos puros y Wüllersdorf volvió a desviar la conversación hacia temas más intrascendentes.

—Me extraña que nadie de Kessin haya venido a saludarle. Sé que aquí es usted muy apreciado. Ni siquiera su amigo Gieshübler…

Innstetten sonrió.

—Ya veo que no conoce usted a la gente de la costa: tienen una mezcla de filisteísmo y pillería que no es muy de mi agrado, pero sí que poseen una virtud, y es la de las buenas maneras. Sobre todo mi viejo amigo Gieshübler. Y como aquí todo el mundo sabe ya de qué va el asunto, no vienen para no parecer indiscretos.

En ese momento vieron venir por la izquierda un coche con la capota bajada, que avanzaba lentamente porque aún no era la hora convenida.

—¿Es el nuestro? —preguntó Innstetten.

—Probablemente.

Poco después el coche paró delante del hotel, e Innstetten y Wüllersdorf se levantaron.

Wüllersdorf se acercó al cochero y dijo:

—¡Al espigón!

Este se encontraba en la dirección contraria, a la derecha en vez de a la izquierda, y Wüllersdorf dio esta orden falsa para evitar cualquier posible incidente. Por otra parte, tanto si tomaban por un camino como por otro, una vez fuera de la ciudad tendrían que atravesar la plantación y deberían pasar forzosamente por delante de la antigua casa de Innstetten. El lugar parecía más desolado que nunca, y las habitaciones de la planta de abajo presentaban un aspecto de abandono. ¡Cómo debía de estar el piso de arriba! Y de pronto experimentó la misma sensación de angustia que Effi, la misma que tanto había combatido e incluso desdeñado, y se sintió aliviado cuando dejaron atrás la casa.

—Ahí vivía yo —dijo Innstetten.

—Tiene un aspecto muy extraño… parece desierta, abandonada.

—Así es. En la ciudad decían que era una casa encantada, que había un fantasma, y, viéndola así, se entiende que la gente lo pensara.

—¿Y qué había detrás de esa historia?

—¡Tonterías! Un capitán de barco con una sobrina o una nieta que un buen día desapareció y un chino que quizá fuera su amante… Y en el vestíbulo, colgados del techo, un tiburón y un cocodrilo disecados que siempre se estaban moviendo. Sin duda es una historia fantástica, pero en este momento son otros fantasmas muy distintos los que me rondan por la mente.

—No olvide que todo podría arreglarse de forma pacífica.

—No puede ser. Y eso mismo opinaba usted, Wüllersdorf, cuando hace un momento me hablaba de Crampas.

Poco después atravesaron la plantación, y el cochero se disponía a girar hacia la derecha en dirección al espigón.

—Gire a la izquierda. Al espigón ya iremos más tarde.

El cochero hizo lo que se le ordenó y continuó por una carretera que discurría por detrás de la zona de baños para caballeros en dirección al bosque. Cuando se hubieron adentrado en él unos trescientos pasos, Wüllersdorf hizo detener el coche y los dos hombres bajaron a pie por un ancho sendero de arena finísima que atravesaba la triple hilera de dunas. En los lados crecían abundantes matas de barrón mezcladas con siemprevivas y algunos claveles rojos. Innstetten se agachó, cortó un clavel y se lo puso en el ojal de la solapa.

—Las siemprevivas después.

Caminaron unos cinco minutos hasta alcanzar la pequeña garganta entre las dos primeras hileras de dunas, donde en la parte izquierda divisaron ya a sus adversarios: Crampas y Buddenbrook, acompañados por el buen doctor Hannemann, con el sombrero en la mano y su blanca cabellera ondeando al viento.

Innstetten y Wüllersdorf ascendieron por el camino de arena y Buddenbrook salió a su encuentro. Después de saludarse, los padrinos se alejaron un poco para acabar de ultimar los detalles. Acordaron que

avanzasen simultáneamente y que, a unos diez pasos de distancia, abrieran fuego. Buddenbrook regresó a su puesto. Todo fue muy deprisa. Sonaron los disparos. Crampas cayó.

Innstetten retrocedió unos pasos y se alejó de la escena. Wüllersdorf se acercó a Buddenbrook y ambos esperaron el diagnóstico del médico, que se encogió de hombros. Crampas hizo un gesto con la mano para indicar que quería decir algo. Wüllersdorf se inclinó hacia él, asintió con la cabeza a las palabras que salían casi inaudibles de los labios del moribundo, y después se dirigió a donde estaba Innstetten.

—Crampas quiere decirle algo, Innstetten. Debe concederle ese último deseo. Apenas le quedan tres minutos de vida.

Innstetten se acercó a Crampas.

—Querría usted…

Fueron sus últimas palabras. Todavía cruzó por su rostro un atisbo doloroso y aun así plácido, y luego todo acabó.

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Esa misma noche Innstetten estaba de vuelta en Berlín. En el mismo coche que le había llevado al camino de entrada a las dunas, se dirigió directamente a la estación, sin pasar por Kessin, dejando que los padrinos se encargasen de informar a las autoridades. Durante todo el trayecto, ya sólo en el compartimento, fue repasando todo lo sucedido. Eran los mismos pensamientos de hacía dos días, sólo que ahora en orden inverso: el primero era la profunda convicción de que estaba en su derecho y había cumplido con su deber, y luego le asaltaban las dudas. «La culpa, si es que existe tal cosa, no es una cuestión que dependa del lugar ni de la hora, no es algo que prescriba de la noche a la mañana. La culpa exige una expiación; esto sí tiene sentido. La prescripción no tiene ningún fundamento sólido, es cuando menos prosaica». Esa idea le confortó y no dejaba de repetirse que había hecho lo que tenía que hacer. Pero, en el preciso instante en que lo veía todo tan claro, volvía a rebatir el argumento. «Tiene que existir un límite de tiempo, la prescripción es la única vía razonable; y no importa lo prosaica que pueda resultar, porque lo que es razonable suele ser prosaico. Ahora tengo cuarenta y cinco años. Si hubiera encontrado las cartas dentro de veinticinco años, tendría setenta. Y entonces Wüllersdorf habría dicho: "Innstetten, no sea insensato". Y si no me lo hubiera dicho Wüllersdorf, lo habría hecho Buddenbrook, y si ninguno de ellos lo hubiera hecho, yo mismo me lo habría dicho. Esto está muy claro. Cuando se llega a tales extremos, se cae en el ridículo. De eso no hay duda. Pero ¿dónde comienza? ¿Cuál es el límite? Antes de diez años todavía se exige un duelo para reparar la ofensa, y a eso se le llama defender el honor; pero después de once años, o quizá de diez y medio, ya se le llama hacer un disparate. El límite… ¿dónde está el límite? ¿Era este? ¿O ya lo he traspasado? Cuando recuerdo su última mirada, resignada pero con una sonrisa en medio de su agonía, era como si me dijera: "¡Los principios, Innstetten…! Podría haberme evitado esto, y también se lo podría haber evitado usted". Y quizá tenía razón. En el fondo de mi alma, yo también lo siento así. Sí hubiera estado poseído por un odio mortal, animado por una profunda sed de venganza… La venganza no es admirable, pero es humana, y es un derecho humano natural. Pero en este caso no ha sido más que un acto en nombre de una idea, de un concepto, una historia artificial, casi una comedia. Y ahora debo continuar con esta comedia, dejar a Effi, arruinar su vida y también la mía… Debería haber quemado las cartas, y el mundo nunca se hubiera enterado de nada. Y cuando ella hubiese llegado, sin sospechar lo que había pasado, tendría que haberle dicho: "Este es tu lugar", y a nivel íntimo me habría separado de ella. Pero no ante el mundo. Hay tantas vidas que no son vidas reales, hay tantos matrimonios que no son matrimonios reales… Se habría acabado para mí la felicidad, pero ahora no viviría acosado por esa mirada interrogante y esa afable, silenciosa acusación».

Poco antes de las diez, el coche de Innstetten se detuvo delante de su casa. Subió la escalera y tiró de la campanilla. Johanna salió a abrirle.

—¿Cómo está Annie?

—Bien, señor. Aún no se ha dormido… Si el señor…

—No, no; no quiero que se altere. Mejor será que la vea por la mañana. Tráigame una taza de té. ¿Ha venido alguien?

—Sólo el doctor.

Innstetten se quedó otra vez solo. Caminaba de un lado a otro, como tenía por costumbre. «Ya lo saben todo. Roswitha no es muy espabilada, pero Johanna es una muchacha lista. Y si no lo saben con certeza, seguro que se lo imaginan por todo lo que ha pasado. Es curioso observar cómo se pueden ir juntando los detalles y convertirse en señales que revelan las historias como si todos hubieran estado al tanto».

Johanna trajo el té e Innstetten se lo bebió. Después de toda la tensión del día, estaba rendido y se durmió enseguida.

Innstetten se levantó temprano. Fue a ver a Annie, intercambió con ella algunas frases, alabándola por ser una enferma muy buena, y a continuación se dirigió al ministerio para informar a su superior de todo lo ocurrido. El ministro se mostró muy indulgente con él: «Sí, Innstetten, feliz el hombre que logra salir airoso de los trances que le depara la vida. Es una lástima que haya tenido que tocarle a usted». Encontró muy correcto todo lo que había hecho y dejó en sus manos que hiciera lo que considerase oportuno.

A última hora de la tarde Innstetten regresó a su casa, donde encontró unas líneas de Wüllersdorf.

> He llegado esta mañana. En este corto tiempo he asistido a todo tipo de escenas, unas dolorosas, otras conmovedoras, sobre todo con Gieshübler. Es el jorobado más encantador que he conocido en mi vida. No habló mucho de usted, pero de la señora… ¡ah, la señora! El pobre hombrecillo estaba desconsolado, y al final rompió a llorar. ¡Vivir para ver! Ojalá hubiese más hombres como Gieshübler. Pero abundan más de los otros. Y luego, la escena en casa del comandante… terrible. Mejor no hablar de ello. Algo que he aprendido de todo esto es que hay que ir siempre con mucho cuidado. Le veré mañana. Suyo,
>
> W.

Tras leer la nota, Innstetten quedó muy afectado. Se sentó y escribió dos cartas. Cuando hubo acabado, hizo sonar la campanilla.

—Johanna, lleve estas cartas al correo.

La doncella las cogió y se disponía a salir.

—Ah, otra cosa, Johanna: la señora no va a volver. Ya se enterará de los motivos. Annie no debe saber nada, al menos de momento. ¡Pobre niña! Poco a poco deberá ir haciéndole entender que ya no tiene madre. Yo no me veo con fuerzas. Pero hágalo con mucho tacto y delicadeza, y procure que Roswitha no lo eche todo a perder.

Johanna se quedó como aturdida durante un instante. Luego se acercó a Innstetten y le besó la mano.

Cuando volvió a la cocina, la invadía un sentimiento de orgullo y de superioridad, casi de felicidad. El señor no sólo se lo había confiado todo, sino que al final había añadido: «procure que Roswitha no lo eche todo a perder». Eso era lo más importante, y aunque tenía buen corazón e incluso sentía compasión por la señora, lo que más la satisfacía en ese momento era haber establecido cierta complicidad con el señor.

En circunstancias normales, podría haberse jactado fácilmente de su triunfo, pero ese día la situación no le fue propicia, ya que su rival, pese a no haber gozado de la confianza del señor, resultó ser la mejor informada de las dos. Y es que el portero, más o menos mientras Johanna hablaba con el señor, había llamado a Roswitha a su cuartito de la portería y le había plantado un diario ante las narices.

—Roswitha, aquí hay algo que le interesa. Lléveselo y ya me lo bajará cuando lo haya leído. Es el *Fremdenblatt* y no trae mucha cosa, pero Lene ya ha salido a comprar el *Kleine Journal*. Ahí seguro que habrá más detalles, esos lo saben siempre todo. Figúrese, Roswitha, ¡quién se lo iba a imaginar!

Roswitha no solía pecar de excesiva curiosidad, pero tras escuchar estas palabras subió corriendo por la escalera de servicio, y acababa de leer la noticia cuando Johanna, dejando las cartas de Innstetten sobre la mesa de la cocina y simulando mirar las direcciones (aunque sabía perfectamente a quién iban dirigidas), se acercó a ella y le dijo con aparente indiferencia:

—Una es para Hohen-Cremmen.

—Ya me imagino —dijo Roswitha.

El comentario dejó a Johanna bastante sorprendida.

—El señor no suele escribir a Hohen-Cremmen.

—Ya, por lo general no. Pero ahora… Figúrese, el portero me acaba de pasar esto.

Johanna tomó el diario y leyó en voz baja una noticia subrayada con un grueso trazo de tinta: «Al cierre de esta edición, fuentes bien informadas nos comunican que ayer por la mañana, en el balneario de Kessin, en la Pomerania Oriental, tuvo lugar un duelo entre el consejero ministerial V. I. (Keithstrasse) y el comandante Von Crampas. El comandante Von Crampas resultó muerto. Al parecer este había mantenido una relación con la esposa del consejero, una mujer muy joven y de gran belleza».

—¡Qué cosas se escriben en estos diarios! —dijo Johanna, malhumorada al ver que se le habían adelantado con la noticia.

—Sí —dijo Roswitha—, y ahora la gente lo leerá y quién sabe lo que dirá de mi pobre y querida señora. Y el pobre comandante… Está muerto.

—¿Y qué quería usted, Roswitha? ¿Que no lo estuviera? ¿O acaso preferiría que el muerto hubiese sido el señor?

—No, Johanna. Yo quiero que el señor viva, que todo el mundo viva. No me gusta que maten a nadie. Ni

siquiera soporto el ruido de los disparos. Pero piense, Johanna, que de todo eso hace ya una eternidad, y que las cartas, que desde un principio me parecieron tan extrañas, con esa cinta roja que les daba tres o cuatro vueltas y con ese nudo sin lazo, estaban ya amarilleadas por el tiempo. Ya llevamos aquí más de seis años, y no entiendo cómo por una historia tan antigua…

—¡Ah, Roswitha, ya puede decir lo que quiera! Pero, bien mirado, usted tiene la culpa. Todo ha venido por las cartas. ¿Cómo se le ocurrió coger aquel punzón y forzar el armario de la costura? Nunca debería haberlo hecho, nunca debería haber forzado una cerradura que otra persona había cerrado.

—Pero, Johanna, ¡esto ya es el colmo! Echarme en cara una cosa así, sabiendo perfectamente que la culpa la tuvo usted al entrar como una loca en la cocina y decirme que había que abrir el armario de la costura como fuera, porque la venda estaba allí. Y ahora resulta que yo soy la culpable. No, si de verdad…

—Está bien, Roswitha, retiro lo dicho. Pero no me venga con lo del pobre comandante… ¿Qué quiere decir con eso? El pobre comandante, como usted dice, no valía todo él un comino, siempre fanfarroneando con sus bigotes rojizos. Ya se veía que no traería más que desgracias. Y cuando una ha servido siempre en casas nobles, claro que usted carece de esa experiencia, entonces es cuando se aprende lo que está bien, lo que es la decencia y el honor, y cómo se debe proceder en tales casos. Y cuando ocurre una cosa así, no hay otra salida, tiene que producirse lo que se conoce como un duelo. Y entonces uno de los dos debe morir.

—Eso también lo sé yo. No soy tan tonta como se figura. Pero cuando hace tanto tiempo…

—Roswitha, en ese «hace tanto tiempo» que no deja de repetir es donde se ve que no entiende nada de esto. Usted se pasa la vida contando la historia de su padre persiguiéndola con el hierro ardiendo, y cada vez que caliento la plancha no puedo dejar de pensar en su padre intentando matarla por culpa de aquella criatura que ya está muerta. Sí, Roswitha, siempre está hablando de lo mismo, y ya lo único que faltaría es que le vaya con el cuento a Annie, y que el día que la niña reciba la confirmación se conozca al dedillo toda esa historia. Y lo que me indigna es que usted, que ha pasado por todo eso cuando su padre no era más que un simple herrero que no hacía más que herrar caballos y poner llantas a las ruedas, opine ahora que nuestro señor debería aceptarlo todo tranquilamente sólo por el hecho de que haya pasado tanto tiempo. ¿Y qué significa eso de tanto tiempo? Seis años no es tanto tiempo. Y la señora, que por cierto ya no volverá, el señor acaba de decírmelo, aún no tiene ni veintiséis años, los cumplirá en agosto, así que no me venga con lo de «hace tanto tiempo». Y aunque tuviera treinta y seis años, que ya le digo yo que hasta los treinta y seis hay que ir con mucho cuidado, y el señor no hubiera hecho nada, la gente distinguida le hubiera «marginado». Pero seguro que usted, Roswitha, no conoce esa palabra, porque no entiende nada de estas cosas.

—No, ni las entiendo ni quiero entenderlas. Pero lo que sí entiendo es que usted está enamorada del señor.

Johanna dejó escapar una risa forzada.

—Sí, ríase cuanto quiera, pero yo ya hace tiempo que me he dado cuenta. Es una suerte que el señor no se fije en esas cosas… ¡Pobre señora mía! ¡Pobre señora mía!

Johanna quiso hacer las paces.

—Dejémoslo estar, Roswitha. A veces dice usted unas cosas delirantes, pero ya sé que eso es normal entre las gentes del campo.

—Puede ser.

—Voy a echar las cartas y de paso miraré si el portero ya tiene el otro diario. Si la he entendido bien, ha mandado a Lene a buscarlo, ¿no? En ese pondrá más cosas, porque en este prácticamente no dice nada.

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Ya hacía unas tres semanas que Effi y la esposa del consejero Zwicker estaban en Ems, alojadas en la planta baja de una pequeña y encantadora villa. Entre los dormitorios de ambas había una sala con vistas al jardín, con un piano de cola de madera de palisandro en el que Effi tocaba de vez en cuando alguna sonata y la señora Zwicker algún vals. Esta última carecía totalmente de oído musical, que solía limitarse a mostrar su entusiasmo por Niemann en el papel de Tannhäuser.

Hacía una mañana preciosa; en el jardín trinaban los pájaros y desde la casa vecina, en la que había un «bar», llegaba pese a lo temprano de la hora el entrechocar de las bolas de billar. Las señoras no habían desayunado en la sala, sino en una terraza cubierta de grava, rodeada de un murete de poca altura, y desde la que se bajaba al jardín por tres escalones. No habían corrido el toldo, a fin de poder disfrutar plenamente del aire puro, y tanto Effi como la consejera estaban enfrascadas en sus labores de bordado. Sólo de vez en cuando intercambiaban algunas palabras.

—No comprendo —dijo Effi— cómo es que no he recibido ninguna carta en cuatro días. Normalmente me escribe a diario. ¿Estará enferma Annie? ¿O tal vez él mismo?

La señora Zwicker sonrió.

—Ya verá, querida amiga, como su marido está más sano que una manzana.

Effi se sintió desagradablemente sorprendida por el tono en que fueron dichas estas palabras, y parecía dispuesta a contestar algo en el preciso instante en que, procedente de la sala, la criada salió a la terraza para despejar la mesa del desayuno. Se llamaba Afra, y era una muchacha de los alrededores de Bonn, acostumbrada a juzgar todos los aspectos de la vida desde el prisma de los estudiantes y los húsares que había conocido desde muy joven en aquella ciudad.

—Afra —dijo Effi—, ya deben de ser las nueve. ¿No ha pasado el cartero todavía?

—No, señora, todavía no.

—¿Y cómo puede ser?

—Es por culpa del cartero, que es de Siegenschen y no tiene sangre en las venas. Ya se lo he dicho yo a él, que es un flojo. ¡Y cómo lleva el pelo! No creo ni que sepa lo que es hacerse la raya.

—Afra, no sea tan dura con él. Imagine lo que debe de ser trabajar como cartero, todo el día arriba y abajo, y con este calor…

—Tiene razón, señora. Pero hay otros que se esfuerzan por cumplir. Todo depende de las ganas que se pongan.

Y diciendo esto tomó hábilmente la bandeja y, sosteniéndola sobre las puntas de los cinco dedos, bajó la escalera del jardín para dirigirse por el camino más corto a la cocina.

—Es una chica muy linda —observó la señora Zwicker—, muy dispuesta y eficiente, y casi diría que dotada de un encanto natural. Le diré, querida baronesa, que a mí esta Afra… que, por cierto, es un nombre precioso, creo que hay incluso una santa Afra, aunque no creo que la nuestra se llame así por ella…

—Ya está otra vez, querida consejera, yéndose por las ramas. Ahora se pone a hablar del nombre de Afra y se olvida por completo de lo que quería decirme…

—De ningún modo, querida baronesa, ahora mismo me disponía a retomar el hilo. Lo que iba a decirle es que a mí esta Afra me recuerda de un modo extraordinario a aquella muchacha tan apañada que vi en su casa…

—Sí que es cierto, tiene un aire. Pero nuestra doncella de Berlín es mucho más guapa, y sobre todo tiene un cabello mucho más espeso y bonito. En mi vida he visto una melena rubia tan preciosa como la de nuestra Johanna. Hay algunas muy bonitas, pero no tan abundantes.

La señora Zwicker sonrió.

—No es muy habitual escuchar a una joven señora hablando con tanto entusiasmo del cabello rubio de una criada. ¡Y de su abundancia! ¿Sabe usted que me resulta enternecedor? Pero lo cierto es que elegir a

una muchacha constituye siempre un asunto delicado. Deben ser bonitas, porque a los visitantes, al menos a los hombres, les molesta que les abra la puerta un palo de escoba con la tez grisácea y ojerosa, y eso que es una suerte que los pasillos suelan estar tan oscuros. Pero, por otra parte, si le prestas demasiada atención a la imagen que quieres dar de tu casa, a eso que se ha dado en llamar primera impresión, y empiezas a regalarle a la linda doncella bonitas cofias y delantales blancos, ya nunca más tendrás un momento de tranquilidad, porque no dejarás de preguntarte si no estarás siendo demasiado engreída y confiada, y si llegará un día en que habrá que poner a grandes males grandes remedios. «A grandes males, grandes remedios», esa era una de las expresiones favoritas de Zwicker, de esas que tantas veces llegaban a resultarte irritantes, pero está claro que todos los consejeros ministeriales tienen sus expresiones favoritas.

Effi la escuchaba con una mezcla de sentimientos encontrados. Si la señora Zwicker hubiera sido de otra manera, habría encontrado todo aquello en cierto modo simpático, pero siendo como era, a Effi la impresionaba desagradablemente lo que de otro modo tal vez le hubiera hecho gracia.

—Tiene mucha razón, querida amiga, en eso que dice de los consejeros. Innstetten también se ha acostumbrado a utilizar algunas de esas expresiones, y siempre se ríe cuando se lo hago notar y se excusa. Claro que su marido llevaba más tiempo en el cargo y debía de ser bastante mayor…

—No tanto —dijo la consejera en tono tajante y mordaz.

—En fin, sinceramente, no acabo de comprender los temores a que se refería usted antes. Las buenas costumbres, como se suele decir, todavía tienen su peso…

—¿Usted cree?

—… Y, sobre todo, no puedo imaginarme que precisamente usted, querida amiga, se haya visto expuesta a semejantes temores e incómodas situaciones. Tiene usted, y disculpe que le hable con tanta franqueza, eso que los hombres llaman *charme*. Es alegre, fascinante, atractiva, y si no es indiscreción me gustaría preguntarle si, pese a todas sus grandes cualidades, ha sufrido alguna experiencia personal dolorosa que la lleve a hablar de ese modo.

—¿Dolorosa? ¡Oh, amiga mía! —exclamó la señora Zwicker—. «Dolorosa» es una palabra demasiado fuerte, aun cuando se haya pasado por alguna de esas situaciones. Decir «doloroso» es exagerado, muy exagerado. Y, después de todo, una siempre dispone de otros recursos para afrontarlo, para contraatacar. No tiene que tomárselo todo por el lado trágico.

—No logro hacerme una idea de lo que quiere usted insinuar. No es que no sepa lo que es el pecado, porque lo sé. Pero existe una diferencia entre encontrarse casi sin querer teniendo malos pensamientos, y llegar a hacerlos realidad, o incluso convertirlos en algo habitual. Y además dentro de la propia casa…

—No me refería a eso, ni tampoco creo haberlo expresado de forma tan directa, aunque debo confesarle que respecto a esas cosas que le contaba soy muy desconfiada, o mejor dicho lo era, porque ya ha pasado mucho tiempo. Pero también hay otros lugares más discretos. ¿Ha oído hablar de las excursiones al campo?

—Desde luego, y ya me gustaría que Innstetten tuviera más afición a ellas.

—¿Se da cuenta de lo que está diciendo, querida amiga? Zwicker se pasaba la vida yendo a Staatwinkel. Puedo asegurarle que, sólo con oír ese nombre, todavía noto una punzada en el corazón. ¡Todos esos lugares de esparcimiento en los alrededores de nuestro querido Berlín! Porque, a pesar de todo, yo adoro Berlín. Pero la mera mención de todos esos lugares me llena de angustia e inquietud. Veo que se sonríe… Pero dígame, querida amiga, ¿qué puede esperarse de una gran ciudad y de sus buenas costumbres cuando, justo a sus puertas (porque entre Charlottenburg y Berlín no hay prácticamente diferencia), se amontonan en un radio de menos de dos kilómetros un Pichelsberg, un Pichelsdorf y un Pichelswerder? Tres Pichel, tres invitaciones a la embriaguez, es realmente demasiado. Ya puede buscar en todo el mundo que no encontrará nada igual.

Effi asintió.

—Y todo esto —prosiguió la señora Zwicker— ocurre en los bosques de las orillas del Havel, al oeste, donde hay mucha cultura y urbanidad. Pero ahora, querida amiga, váyase hacia el otro lado, remontando el Spree. No hablo de Treptow y de Stralau, que no son más que bagatelas, lugares inofensivos; pero si coge un mapa detallado del lugar, junto a nombres tan curiosos como Kiekebusch o Wuhlheide (tendría que haber oído a Zwicker pronunciar este último), encontrará otros de una brutal vulgaridad, con cuya mención no quiero escandalizar sus oídos. Y, como es natural, esos son justamente los lugares preferidos, los más frecuentados. Detesto esas salidas al campo, que la imaginación popular concibe como simples excursiones en tartana en las que todo el mundo canta «Soy prusiano», pero que en realidad no son más que un caldo de cultivo para la revolución social. Y cuando hablo de revolución social, me refiero naturalmente a una revolución moral. Todo lo demás son tonterías, ya está superado, e incluso el mismo Zwicker solía decírmelo en sus últimos días: «Créeme, Sophie, Saturno devora a sus hijos». Y debo reconocer que, pese a

todos sus defectos y flaquezas, Zwicker era poseedor de una mentalidad filosófica y de una percepción natural muy aguda de la evolución de la historia… Pero ya veo, mi querida señora Von Innstetten, que aunque por lo general se muestre siempre tan educada, ahora me está escuchando sólo a medias. Y está claro que ya ha visto aparecer al cartero y que su corazón ha volado a su encuentro, anticipándose a las palabras de amor de la carta que espera… Y bien, Böselager, ¿qué nos trae?

Entretanto, el interpelado se había acercado a la mesa y fue dejando sobre ella algunos periódicos, dos anuncios de peluquerías y, por último, un gran sobre certificado dirigido a la señora baronesa Von Innstetten, nacida Von Briest.

La destinataria firmó y el cartero se marchó. La señora Zwicker echó un vistazo a los anuncios de las peluquerías y se rio comentando los descuentos ofrecidos en los precios del champú y el lavado de cabeza.

Effi no la escuchaba; presa de un temor inexplicable, no se atrevía a abrir la carta, a la que no cesaba de dar vueltas entre sus manos. ¿Qué significaba aquel certificado, lacrado y con un sobre tan grueso? El matasellos era de Hohen-Cremmen, y la letra con la dirección era de su madre. Y ya era el quinto día que no recibía carta de Innstetten.

Cogió unas tijerillas con mango de nácar y cortó lentamente uno de los lados del sobre. Lo que encontró en su interior la sorprendió aún más. Había una carta, en efecto, con unas líneas muy apretujadas escritas por su madre, pero también había un fajo de billetes rodeados con una amplia tira de papel, sobre la cual, en lápiz rojo y con la letra de su padre, estaba anotado el importe de la suma. Dejó a un lado el dinero y, reclinándose contra el respaldo de la mecedora, empezó a leer la carta. Pero pronto interrumpió la lectura: la hoja se le cayó de las manos y se puso pálida como la cera. Luego se inclinó y recogió la carta del suelo.

—¿Qué le pasa, querida amiga? ¿Malas noticias?

Effi asintió con la cabeza, pero no dio más explicaciones y se limitó a pedir un vaso de agua. Después de beber un par de sorbos, dijo:

—Ya se me pasará, querida consejera, pero ahora me gustaría retirarme un momento… Haga el favor de enviarme a Afra.

Se levantó y entró en la sala, donde sintió un ligero alivio al poder detenerse un momento y encontrar el apoyo del piano de cola para seguir avanzando. Así llegó a su habitación, que estaba a la derecha, y tras conseguir abrir a tientas la puerta y atravesar todo el dormitorio hasta la cama, se desmayó.

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Transcurrieron varios minutos. Cuando se recuperó, Effi se sentó en una silla junto a la ventana y se puso a mirar la calle, ahora tranquila. Si al menos hubiera algo de ruido, de agitación… pero no se percibía más que la luz resplandeciente del sol sobre el adoquinado, sólo interrumpida por las sombras de los árboles y las verjas. La sensación de estar sola en el mundo se apoderó de ella con toda su fuerza. Hacía apenas una hora era totalmente feliz, querida por todos los que la conocían, y ahora era una mujer proscrita. Tan sólo había leído las primeras líneas de la carta, pero le bastaron para darse cuenta claramente de cuál era su situación. ¿Adónde ir? No sabía la respuesta, pero anhelaba con toda su alma huir de todo lo que la rodeaba, alejarse de la consejera Zwicker, para quien su tragedia no sería más que «un caso interesante» y cuya compasión, si es que existía, no llegaría ni por asomo a su curiosidad.

¿Adónde ir?

La carta estaba sobre la mesa, pero le faltaba valor para seguir leyendo. Finalmente se dijo: «¿De qué tengo miedo? ¿Qué puede decir en ella que ya no me haya dicho yo misma? El causante de que todo esto haya sucedido está muerto, a casa no puedo volver, en unas semanas habrá sentencia de divorcio y la niña será entregada a su padre. Como debe ser. Yo soy culpable, y una pecadora no puede educar a su hija. ¿Y cómo podría mantenerla? Yo sola aún podré arreglármelas. A ver qué escribe mamá, a ver qué piensa de cómo será mi vida».

Tras decirse esto, volvió a tomar la carta y la leyó hasta el final.

> … Y ahora, querida Effi, hablemos de tu futuro. Tendrás que instalarte por tu cuenta, y, por lo que respecta a los medios materiales, podrás contar con nuestra ayuda. Lo mejor será que sigas viviendo en Berlín: estas cosas son más llevaderas en una gran ciudad, y allí podrás ser una más entre quienes han renunciado a la luz del sol y al aire libre. Llevarás una vida apartada, y si no te conformas con eso, tendrás que relacionarte con gente de un nivel inferior. El mundo en el cual has vivido hasta ahora te cerrará sus puertas. Y lo que es más triste para nosotros y para ti también (sí, para ti también, conociéndote como creemos conocerte), también la casa de tus padres te cerrará sus puertas. No podemos acogerte en Hohen-Cremmen, no podemos ofrecerte un refugio en nuestro hogar, porque eso sería como aislarnos del mundo y de la sociedad, y no estamos dispuestos a hacer tal sacrificio. Y no porque las cosas del mundo nos importen demasiado, ni porque nos resultara insoportable vivir apartados de lo que llamamos «sociedad». No, no es por eso, sino sencillamente porque tenemos que mostrar cuál es nuestra postura y manifestar claramente ante el mundo que, y me temo que no puedo evitar la palabra, condenamos tu comportamiento, el comportamiento de nuestra única y muy querida hija…

Effi no pudo continuar leyendo. Sus ojos se anegaron de lágrimas, y tras luchar en vano por evitarlo, prorrumpió en unos violentos sollozos que ayudaron a aliviar su corazón.

Media hora más tarde oyó unos pequeños golpes en la puerta, y en respuesta al «Adelante» de Effi apareció la viuda del consejero Zwicker.

—¿Puedo pasar?

—Por supuesto, querida señora —dijo Effi, que se hallaba ahora tendida en el sofá, ligeramente tapada y con las manos entrelazadas—. Me encuentro muy cansada y me he echado un rato. Tenga la bondad de sentarse.

La consejera tomó una silla y se sentó al otro lado de la mesa, sobre la que había un centro de flores que quedaba entre ambas mujeres. Effi no mostró la menor señal de sentirse incómoda y no modificó su postura, ni siquiera descruzó las manos. De pronto se había tornado indiferente a lo que aquella mujer pudiera pensar de ella; lo único que quería era estar lejos de allí.

—Ha recibido sin duda una triste noticia, querida señora…

—Más que triste —dijo Effi—. En todo caso, lo suficientemente triste para obligarme a poner un rápido

fin a mi estancia en Ems. Debo marcharme hoy mismo.

—No quisiera parecer indiscreta, pero ¿le ha ocurrido algo a Annie?

—No. No se trata de Annie. Las noticias no eran ni siquiera de Berlín, sino que era una carta de mi madre. Está preocupada por mí, y lo que ahora necesito es ayudarla a disipar su intranquilidad o, si eso no es posible, al menos estar a su lado.

—Lo entiendo perfectamente, aunque lamento tener que pasar estos últimos días en Ems sin su compañía. Si puedo ayudarla en algo…

Antes de que Effi pudiera contestar, Afra entró para anunciar que ya estaba todo preparado para el almuerzo. Dijo que todo el mundo estaba muy emocionado, añadió, ya que se esperaba la llegada del emperador para pasar unas tres semanas en Ems, y añadió que tras su estancia se realizarían unas grandes maniobras, en las que también participarían los húsares de Bonn.

La señora Zwicker sopesó rápidamente si valdría la pena quedarse hasta entonces, y tras decidir que sin duda así era, salió para excusar la ausencia de Effi durante el almuerzo.

Afra se disponía también a abandonar la habitación cuando Effi le dijo:

—Dentro de un rato, Afra, cuando pueda, me gustaría que se pasara por aquí un cuarto de hora para ayudarme a hacer el equipaje. Quiero salir hoy mismo en el tren de las siete.

—¿Hoy, tan pronto? ¡Ay, señora, qué lástima! ¡Ahora que empiezan los días más hermosos!

Effi sonrió.

A la señora Zwicker, que todavía tenía la esperanza de enterarse de más cosas, le costó mucho dejarse convencer de que no acompañara a la «señora baronesa» a la estación. Effi le aseguró que en las estaciones una está siempre muy distraída, preocupada sólo por el equipaje y por coger asiento, por lo que es preferible despedirse antes de las personas a las que quieres. La señora Zwicker accedió, aunque tenía muy claro que aquello no era más que un pretexto; era una mujer con mucha experiencia de la vida, y sabía distinguir al instante entre lo que era sincero y lo que no.

Afra acompañó a Effi a la estación y le hizo prometer solemnemente a la baronesa que volvería al verano siguiente. Quien ha estado una vez en Ems vuelve siempre, le dijo, porque, después de Bonn, no hay lugar más hermoso que Ems.

Mientras tanto, la señora Zwicker se había sentado a escribir una carta, no en el secreter un tanto rococó de la sala, sino afuera en la terraza, en la misma mesa en la que no hacía ni diez horas había tomado el desayuno con Effi.

Estaba deseando escribir aquella carta, pensando en la alegría que le daría a una antigua amiga, una dama berlinesa que actualmente se encontraba en Reichenhall. Eran dos espíritus afines que se habían encontrado hacía tiempo y que coincidían en un marcado escepticismo respecto a todo lo concerniente al mundo masculino. Ambas pensaban que los hombres estaban muy por debajo de lo que razonablemente cabía esperarse de ellos, especialmente los que solían tener fama de «audaces». «Los que por timidez no saben adónde mirar son, a fin de cuentas, los mejores. Pero los conquistadores constituyen siempre una gran decepción. ¿Y qué otra cosa cabría esperar?». Tal era el tenor de las sabias palabras que solían intercambiar ambas amigas.

La señora Zwicker iba ya por la segunda hoja, y ahora se explayaba en un tema mucho más gratificante, que era naturalmente el asunto de Effi, con las siguientes palabras:

> En resumidas cuentas, era muy agradable y educada, aparentemente sincera, sin darse excesivos aires de nobleza (o al menos muy hábil para ocultarlos), y siempre escuchaba con gran atención cuando le explicaban algo interesante, de lo cual no preciso decirte que yo me aprovechaba. En fin, repito que era una mujer encantadora, de poco más de veinticinco años. Sin embargo, nunca llegué a creerme el remanso de paz que aparentaba ser su vida, y sigo sin creérmelo, ahora con más motivo. Detrás de todo el asunto de la carta de hoy se oculta una historia muy seria. Estoy casi segura de ello, y sería la primera vez que me equivocase en una cosa de estas. Esa afición que tenía a hablar siempre de los predicadores que estaban de moda en Berlín, determinando el grado de devoción de cada uno de ellos, y esas miradas suyas de niña buena que nunca ha roto un plato… todo eso no hace más que reafirmarme en mi convicción… Pero en este momento acaba de llegar Afra, una muchacha muy linda de la cual creo haberte hablado ya, y ha dejado sobre mi mesa un periódico que, según dice, le ha entregado para mí la dueña del hotel. Veo que hay unas líneas subrayadas en azul. Perdóname que interrumpa la carta, voy a leer el pasaje…
>
> Posdata. La lectura de la noticia me ha resultado sumamente interesante y ha llegado como caída del cielo. Recorto el trozo subrayado y te lo adjunto. Como ves, no me equivocaba. ¿Quién debía de ser ese tal Crampas?

¡Es realmente increíble! ¡Primero escribir cartas y billetes, y encima conservar los que le había escrito el otro! ¿Para qué sirven las estufas y las chimeneas? Estas cosas no deberían hacerse nunca, al menos mientras perdure esta estúpida tradición de los duelos. Tal vez a las generaciones venideras les esté permitida semejante pasión epistolar (porque para entonces ya no resultará tan peligrosa); pero entretanto no hemos llegado a ese punto, ni de lejos. Por mi parte, compadezco a la pobre joven baronesa, y el único consuelo que encuentro, vanidosa como soy, es que no me equivocaba respecto a ella. Y eso que el caso no era nada fácil. Alguien con menos perspicacia para el diagnóstico tal vez se habría dejado engañar. Tuya siempre,

SOPHIE

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Habían transcurrido ya tres años, y Effi había vivido durante casi todo ese tiempo en un pequeño piso de la Königgrätzerstrasse, entre la Askanischer Platz y la Hallesches Tor: dos habitaciones, una que daba a la parte de delante y otra a la de atrás, una cocina y un cuartito para la muchacha; es decir, un lugar muy sencillo y más bien modesto. Y sin embargo era un piso elegante y bonito, que dejaba una grata impresión a quien lo veía, y sobre todo al viejo consejero privado Rummschüttel, que iba de vez en cuando y que hacía mucho tiempo que había perdonado (si es que tal cosa necesitaba perdón) a la joven señora no sólo aquella lejana farsa del reumatismo y la neuralgia, sino también lo que había ocurrido después. A sus casi ochenta años, cada vez que Effi, quien en los últimos tiempos enfermaba con frecuencia, le escribía rogándole que fuese a visitarla, acudía indefectiblemente a la mañana siguiente y se negaba a escuchar sus disculpas por vivir en un piso tan alto.

—Nada de disculpas, querida señora. Este es mi oficio, y además me siento feliz y casi orgulloso de poder subir todavía estos tres pisos. Si no temiese molestarla, ya que después de todo vengo como médico y no como amante de la naturaleza ni como apasionado del paisaje, vendría a visitarla más a menudo, tan sólo para verla a usted y sentarme unos minutos frente a la ventana que da atrás. Creo que no aprecia estas vistas como se merecen.

—Oh, sí que lo hago —exclamó Effi.

Pero Rummschüttel no se dejó interrumpir y continuó:

—Por favor, querida señora, acérquese un momento, o permítame que la acompañe hasta la ventana. ¡Qué vista tan maravillosa! Fíjese en todas esas vías de ferrocarril, tres… no, cuatro, y vea cómo pasan deslizándose los trenes, y mire cómo ahora desaparece aquel tras un grupo de árboles… ¡Realmente magnífico! ¡Y cómo luce el sol a través de las blancas nubecillas de vapor! Si no se viese allí a lo lejos el cementerio de San Mateo, sería ideal.

—A mí me gustan los cementerios.

—Sí, usted puede decirlo. ¡Pero alguien como yo…! Nosotros, los médicos, siempre nos preguntamos si no habría manera de evitar que hubiera menos gente en ellos. Pero, en fin, querida señora, debo decirle que la encuentro bastante bien, y que lo único que lamento es que no quiera ni oír hablar de Ems. Para sus afecciones catarrales, Ems obraría milagros.

Effi no dijo nada.

—Obraría milagros, señora. Pero ya que no quiere usted ir, y yo la comprendo, debe beber las aguas termales de aquí. A unos tres minutos está el parque del Príncipe Alberto, y aun cuando allí no haya música, ni elegantes vestidos, ni todas las distracciones propias de un balneario, lo más importante es la fuente termal.

Effi estuvo de acuerdo. Rummschüttel cogió el sombrero y el bastón. Pero se acercó una vez más a la ventana.

—He oído decir que ahí detrás, en el Kreuzberg, están preparando el terreno para construir un parque. Que Dios bendiga al ayuntamiento. Cuando esa zona tan rala se vea más verde, este pisito será fantástico. Casi la envidio… Y otra cosa que llevo tiempo queriendo decirle: cuando me necesite no hace falta que me escriba, pues aunque sus cartas son tan amables y me producen tanta alegría, constituyen para usted un esfuerzo que sería conveniente evitar… Bastará con que me envíe a Roswitha.

Effi le dio las gracias y se despidieron.

«Bastará con que me envíe a Roswitha», había dicho Rummschüttel. ¿Es que Roswitha vivía con Effi? ¿Es que no estaba en la Keithstrasse, sino en la Königgrätzerstrasse? Pues así es, y hacía mucho tiempo que vivía allí, desde que Effi se había mudado al piso. Tres días antes de instalarse, Roswitha había ido a visitar

a su muy querida señora, y fue un gran día para ambas, tanto que no podemos por menos de recordarlo aquí en retrospectiva.

Cuando llegó la carta de Hohen-Cremmen en la que sus padres la repudiaban y Effi regresó a Berlín en el tren de la noche, no buscó un piso enseguida, sino que probó primero a vivir en una pensión. Y tuvo mucha suerte. Las dos señoras que regentaban la pensión eran personas muy educadas y consideradas, que hacía tiempo que habían desistido de mostrar más curiosidad de la imprescindible. Pasaba por allí tanta gente, que pretender indagar en los secretos de cada individuo habría resultado demasiado laborioso y habría perjudicado la buena marcha del negocio. Effi, que tenía todavía muy presentes los interrogatorios a que la sometían los ojos de la señora Zwicker, se sintió agradablemente impresionada por la reserva de las dos señoras. Pero, al cabo de un par de semanas, se dio cuenta de que la atmósfera que allí reinaba, tanto física como moralmente, le resultaba difícil de soportar. A la mesa solían sentarse siete personas: aparte de Effi y de una de las caseras (la otra llevaba los asuntos internos de la pensión), había un par de estudiantes inglesas, una señora noble de Sajonia, una judía de Galitzia muy hermosa y que nadie sabía exactamente a qué se dedicaba, y la hija de un maestro de Polzin, en la Pomerania, que quería ser pintora. Era sin duda una desafortunada combinación, y la habitual sarta de recíprocos menosprecios, en la que curiosamente la pareja de inglesas no se llevaba la palma, sino que debía compartirla con la hija de Polzin y sus desmesuradas ínfulas de artista, resultaba poco confortadora. Aun así, Effi se mantenía al margen, y habría podido ignorar aquella atmósfera moral tan cargada si no hubiese sido porque también la atmósfera física resultaba irrespirable. No se sabía cuál podía ser la composición exacta del aire de la pensión, pero lo cierto es que a Effi, dada su extrema sensibilidad, le costaba trabajo respirar allí. Ese fue el motivo físico que la obligó a buscar rápidamente otro alojamiento, y lo encontró relativamente cerca, en el piso antes descrito de la Königgrätzerstrasse. Pensaba mudarse allí a principios de otoño, ya se había procurado todo lo necesario para ello, y durante los últimos días de septiembre contaba las horas que le faltaban para marcharse de la pensión.

Uno de esos días de final de septiembre, poco después de salir del comedor, cuando ya estaba en su dormitorio y se disponía a tumbarse un rato en el sofá tapizado con un tejido de lana estampado con grandes flores, llamaron muy suavemente a la puerta.

—Adelante.

La criada de la pensión, una mujer de unos treinta años de aspecto enfermizo, que a causa de su constante ir y venir por los pasillos de la casa arrastraba por todas partes aquel tufo irrespirable, entró y dijo:

—Perdón, señora. Hay una persona que pregunta por usted.

—¿Quién es?

—Una mujer.

—¿Ha dicho su nombre?

—Sí, Roswitha.

En cuanto Effi escuchó ese nombre, se sacudió de su modorra, se levantó de golpe y salió corriendo al pasillo, tomó de las manos a Roswitha y la hizo pasar a la habitación.

—¡Roswitha, eres tú! ¡Qué alegría! ¿Qué te trae por aquí? Sin duda algo bueno, porque un rostro tan bondadoso como el tuyo no puede traer más que algo grato. ¡Ah, qué feliz soy! Me dan ganas de darte un beso. Nunca hubiera creído que volvería a sentir una alegría así. Mi dulce y bondadoso corazón, ¿cómo te van las cosas? ¿Recuerdas cuando nos rondaba el fantasma del chino? ¡Qué tiempos tan felices aquellos! Entonces yo pensaba que eran desgraciados, porque aún no sabía lo dura que puede ser la vida. Ahora ya lo sé. ¡Ah, los fantasmas no son lo peor, ni de lejos! Acércate, mi buena Roswitha, ven, siéntate a mi lado y cuéntame… ¡Ah, cuánta añoranza tengo! Dime, ¿cómo está Annie?

Roswitha apenas podía hablar, mirando aturdida aquella extraña habitación de paredes grisáceas y polvorientas enmarcadas por estrechas molduras doradas. Al final se recompuso y dijo que el señor acababa de regresar de Glatz, porque el viejo káiser había dicho que, en esos casos, con seis semanas había más que suficiente, y que ella había estado esperando a que volviera el señor para ir a verla. Antes no había podido, porque alguien tenía que estar mucho por Annie. Johanna era de confianza, muy limpia y ordenada, pero todavía se veía demasiado guapa y se preocupaba demasiado de sí misma, y a saber qué ideas tenía en la cabeza. Pero ahora que el señor ya estaba en casa y podía vigilar que todo marchase como debía, se había decidido a venir para ver cómo le iba a la señora…

—Has hecho muy bien, Roswitha.

—… y para ver si a la señora le hacía falta alguna cosa, y para decirle que si la necesitaba ella estaba dispuesta a quedarse ahora mismo y hacer todo lo que hiciera falta para que la señora volviera a estar bien.

Effi se había reclinado en un rincón del sofá y había cerrado los ojos. Pero de pronto se incorporó y dijo:

—Sí, Roswitha, eso que dices podría ser muy buena idea. Porque has de saber que no pienso quedarme en esta pensión. Hace poco he alquilado un piso, ya he encargado los muebles y dentro de tres días me traslado. Y si entonces te tuviera a mi lado y pudiera decirte: «No, Roswitha, ese armario no queda bien ahí, hay que ponerlo allá y el espejo en este lado», sería algo que me encantaría. Y cuando hubiésemos acabado con todo el trajín, podría decirte: «Y ahora, Roswitha, baja a buscar una garrafa de cerveza, porque cuando se ha trabajado tanto hay que beber alguna cosa, y si puedes tráete también algo bueno del Habsburger Hof y diles que ya les devolverás los platos…». Sí, Roswitha, cuando pienso en ello, es como si se me quitara un peso del corazón. Sin embargo, debo preguntarte algo: ¿te lo has pensado bien? No me estoy refiriendo a Annie; ya sé que la quieres como si fuera tu propia hija, pero sabes que estará bien cuidada y que Johanna también la quiere mucho. No, no me refiero a eso, sino a tu porvenir. Piensa que si decides quedarte conmigo todo será muy diferente. Yo ya no soy la de antes. He tomado un piso muy pequeño, y probablemente el portero no estará mucho ni por ti ni por mí. No dispondremos ni con mucho de los medios de antes. Y nuestras comidas serán como aquellas que llamábamos «el menú de los jueves», que era el día que acabábamos con todo lo que había en la despensa. ¿Te acuerdas? ¿Y te acuerdas de aquella vez que vino el bueno de Gieshübler y se sentó con nosotras a la mesa, y después aseguró que «nunca había comido nada tan exquisito»? Seguro que te acuerdas. Era tan terriblemente educado… Porque además era la única persona en la ciudad que entendía de cocina. A los demás todo les parecía bueno.

Roswitha se deleitaba con cada una de aquellas palabras, y ya pensaba que todo iría de maravilla, cuando Effi volvió a decir:

—¿Te lo has pensado bien? Ten en cuenta que durante muchos años, y me está mal decirlo, porque se trataba de mi propia casa, has estado muy mal acostumbrada, porque nunca hemos tenido que escatimar en nada. Pero ahora no puedo malgastar, ahora soy pobre, ya que sólo tengo lo que me envían de Hohen-Cremmen. Mis padres son muy buenos conmigo y hacen todo lo que pueden, pero no son ricos. Y ahora dime, ¿qué piensas hacer?

—Pues venirme aquí el sábado que viene con todas mis cosas, y no por la tarde, sino por la mañana. Y estaré aquí cuando comience el traslado, porque yo puedo hacer muchas más cosas de las que podría hacer la señora.

—No digas eso, Roswitha. Yo también puedo. Cuando la necesidad aprieta, hay que hacer de todo.

—Además, la señora no tiene que preocuparse por mí. Como si yo fuese a pensar alguna vez: «¡Roswitha, esto no es lo bastante bueno para ti!». Para Roswitha es bueno todo lo que tenga que compartir con la señora, y más si son penas. Estoy deseando que llegue el día. Ya verá como sabré adaptarme a la nueva situación, y si no, ya verá como lo aprendo enseguida, porque, señora, yo jamás podré olvidar aquel día en el cementerio en que me encontraba tan sola en el mundo y pensaba que lo mejor para mí sería que me enterrasen allí mismo. ¿Y quién apareció entonces? ¿Quién me devolvió a la vida? ¡Ah, he pasado por tantas cosas…! Cuando mi padre se abalanzó sobre mí con el hierro ardiendo…

—Ya lo sé, Roswitha…

—Sí, aquello fue espantoso. Pero cuando estaba allí sentada en el cementerio, tan pobre y abandonada, fue aún más terrible. Y entonces llegó usted, señora. Y no merecería que mi alma se salvara si me olvidase de aquello.

Roswitha se levantó y se dirigió hacia la ventana.

—Mire, señora, ese de ahí también quiere verla. Effi se acercó.

Al otro lado de la calle, Rollo estaba sentado mirando hacia las ventanas de la pensión.

Al cabo de unos días, Effi, ayudada por Roswitha, se instaló en el piso de la Königgrätzerstrasse, y ya desde el primer momento se encontró a gusto. Cierto es que allí no tenía mucha compañía, pero durante su estancia en la pensión el trato social le había resultado tan poco gratificante que no encontró desagradable la soledad, por lo menos al principio. Con Roswitha no se podía entablar una conversación sobre estética, ni siquiera comentar las noticias de los periódicos, pero cuando se trataba de cosas humanas y Effi comenzaba una frase diciendo: «Ay, Roswitha, vuelvo a tener miedo…», entonces siempre encontraba aquella alma fiel que sabía consolarla y a menudo también aconsejarla.

Hasta las navidades la cosa fue bastante bien, pero la Nochebuena resultó muy triste, y a medida que se acercaba el nuevo año Effi comenzó a sentirse presa de la melancolía. No hacía frío, pero los días eran grises y lluviosos, y las tardes se le hacían muy largas. ¿Cómo podía llenarlas? Leía, bordaba, hacía solitarios, tocaba Chopin, pero aquellos nocturnos no eran lo más indicado para llevar luz a su espíritu, así

que cuando Roswitha le servía el té, acompañado de dos platitos con un huevo y un escalope vienés cortado en finas rodajas, Effi cerraba la tapa del piano y le decía:

—Acércate una silla y hazme compañía.

Y Roswitha se sentaba.

—Ya veo lo que le pasa a la señora: otra vez ha estado tocando demasiado tiempo el piano y se le ha puesto esa cara llena de manchas rojas. Ya sabe que el doctor se lo tiene prohibido.

—Qué fácil le resulta al doctor prohibírmelo, y a ti, Roswitha, recordármelo. Pero ¿qué quieres que haga? No puedo pasarme todo el día sentada frente a la ventana, contemplando la iglesia del Santo Cristo de ahí enfrente. Los domingos por la noche, cuando ofician la misa y todas las ventanas están iluminadas, siempre me quedo mirando, pero sólo sirve para ponerme aún más triste.

—Bueno, señora, pues lo que debería hacer entonces es entrar en la iglesia. Creo que ya ha ido alguna vez.

—¡Pues claro, y más de una! Pero tampoco me sirvió de mucho. El pastor predica muy bien y es un hombre muy inteligente, y ya me gustaría saber una centésima parte de lo que él sabe. Pero cuando le escucho es como si estuviera leyendo un libro. Y cuando empieza a hablar tan fuerte y a gesticular haciendo ondear sus negros cabellos, entonces salgo de mi recogimiento y pierdo la devoción.

—¿La pierde…?

Effi se echó a reír.

—¿Quieres decir que nunca la he tenido? Tal vez no. Pero ¿de quién es la culpa? Mía no. ¡Siempre está hablando del Antiguo Testamento! Y aunque todo lo que diga esté muy bien, para mí no es edificante. Escuchar no me sirve de nada. Lo que yo necesito es hacer alguna cosa que me absorba totalmente. Eso es lo que me iría bien. Por lo visto hay algunas asociaciones en las que las jóvenes pueden aprender economía doméstica, enseñar costura o incluso convertirse en cuidadoras de jardín de infancia. ¿Sabes algo de todo esto?

—Bueno, de cuando se habló de llevar a la pequeña Annie a un jardín de infancia.

—¿Lo ves? Ya sabes más que yo. A mí me gustaría poder entrar en una de esas asociaciones en las que puedes ser útil ayudando a los demás. Pero ni siquiera en eso puedo pensar; las señoras no me aceptarían, porque no pueden hacerlo. Esto es lo más terrible: que el mundo te cierre todas sus puertas de tal manera que incluso se te prohíba participar en buenas acciones. Ni siquiera podría dar clases de repaso a los niños pobres…

—Ese tampoco es trabajo para usted, señora. Esos niños siempre llevan unos zapatos roñosos, y cuando llueve se les pega toda la mugre y despiden un tufillo que usted no podría aguantar.

Effi sonrió.

—Supongo que tienes razón, Roswitha, y es muy triste que la tengas, porque eso me hace comprender que aún queda en mí mucho de la persona que era antes, y que las cosas siguen siendo muy fáciles para mí.

Roswitha mostró su total desacuerdo.

—Cuando una persona es tan bondadosa como la señora, las cosas nunca son demasiado fáciles. Y lo que ha de hacer es no darle tantas vueltas a esos temas tan tristes. Muchas veces pienso que ya encontrará algo y que todo volverá a ir bien.

Y, en efecto, lo encontró. Effi, pese que aún recordaba las ínfulas artísticas de la hija del maestro de Polzin como algo espantoso, decidió pintar. Y aunque ella misma se reía, porque sabía que difícilmente pasaría de ser una mera diletante, se entregó a ello con entusiasmo, porque al fin tenía algo que hacer, algo que podía hacer en silencio y que la ayudaría a encontrar la calma que anhelaba. Decidió tomar clases con un viejo profesor de pintura, buen conocedor de la aristocracia de la Marca, y tan piadoso que pronto le cobró gran afecto a Effi. Y tal vez pensando que en ella había un alma que salvar, la trató con tanta amabilidad y ternura como si fuera una hija. A Effi la hizo muy feliz todo aquello, y el día de su primera lección de pintura sintió como si aquello constituyera un giro en su camino hacia la bondad. Su pobre vida ya no era tan triste, y Roswitha se mostraba toda ufana de haber tenido razón al decirle que algo encontraría.

De este modo pasaron varios meses. Pero el hecho de volver a tener trato social con otras personas, pese a llenarla de alegría, también despertó en ella el deseo de que dichas relaciones fueran más amplias y variadas. De vez en cuando añoraba Hohen-Cremmen con auténtica pasión, y aún con mayor pasión deseaba volver a ver a Annie. Después de todo, era su hija, y siempre que pensaba en ella recordaba lo que una vez le había dicho la Trippelli, «El mundo es tan pequeño que hasta en el África Central seguro que te encuentras de pronto con algún viejo conocido», y a Effi la extrañaba, y con razón, no haberse encontrado nunca con Annie por la calle. Pero también eso iba a cambiar. Un día en que regresaba de su clase de

pintura, muy cerca del jardín zoológico y junto a la terminal, subió a un tranvía de caballos que pasaba por la Kurfürstenstrasse. Hacía mucho calor, y las cortinas bajadas que el fuerte viento hacía ondear le proporcionaban una sensación de bienestar. Se apoyó en un rincón, cerca de la plataforma de delante, y estaba mirando el anuncio grabado en un panel de cristal de unos sofás de color azul decorados con borlas, cuando el coche empezó a aminorar la marcha y subieron tres colegialas, con sus carteras a la espalda y sus sombreritos en punta. Dos de ellas eran rubias y vivarachas; la otra era morena, muy seria y comedida. Era Annie. Effi se estremeció violentamente, y el deseo tanto tiempo anhelado de encontrarse con su hija, que ahora se veía cumplido, de pronto la aterrorizó. ¿Qué debía hacer? Se decidió rápidamente y, abriendo la puerta de la plataforma, donde estaba sólo el conductor, le pidió que la dejara bajar por delante en la próxima parada.

—Está prohibido, señorita —dijo el conductor, pero ella le tendió una moneda con una mirada tan suplicante que el hombre se compadeció y finalmente cambió de opinión—. No debería hacerlo, pero por una vez…

Y cuando el tranvía se detuvo, el conductor abrió la portezuela y Effi bajó.

Llegó a casa presa de una gran agitación.

—Imagínate, Roswitha, acabo de ver a Annie.

Y le contó lo ocurrido en el tranvía. Roswitha se sintió desilusionada al enterarse de que no se había producido un emotivo reencuentro entre madre e hija, y sólo de muy mala gana se dejó convencer de que no habría resultado oportuno hacerlo delante de tanta gente extraña. Luego Effi tuvo que explicarle el aspecto que ofrecía Annie, y Roswitha, al ver que lo hacía con el orgullo propio de una madre, le dijo:

—Sí, es mitad y mitad. En muy linda y también tiene, si me permite decirlo, ese extraño encanto de su mamá, pero es tan seria como su papá. Pero en conjunto, y cuando pienso en todo lo ocurrido, creo que se parece más al señor.

—¡Gracias a Dios! —dijo Effi.

—No sé qué decirle, señora, eso depende. Seguro que hay mucha gente que preferiría que se pareciera más a su madre.

—¿Tú crees, Roswitha? Yo no lo creo.

—Vamos, señora, no me venga con esas. Usted sabe muy bien cómo son las cosas, y también lo que les gusta a los hombres.

—No quiero hablar más de esto, Roswitha.

Y así zanjó Effi la conversación, y ya no volvió a sacarse más el tema. Pero, pese a evitar hablar de Annie con Roswitha, no podía apartar de su mente el encuentro con su hija, y pensar en cómo había huido la hacía sufrir. La atormentaba y la avergonzaba, y las ansias de volver a encontrarse con Annie crecieron en ella hasta límites enfermizos. Pedírselo por carta a Innstetten no era posible. Ella era muy consciente de su culpa, y alimentaba aquel sentimiento con algo parecido a una dedicación apasionada; pero, en medio de su remordimiento, también se rebelaba en cierto modo contra Innstetten. Se repetía una y otra vez que él había tenido toda la razón al hacer lo que había hecho, pero al final se decía que no, no había tenido razón. Todo había ocurrido hacía ya mucho tiempo, y habían empezado una nueva vida: tendría que haber dejado que aquella historia se desangrara hasta morir, y en lugar de eso ahora era el pobre Crampas quien estaba muerto.

No, estaba muy claro que no podía escribir a Innstetten, pero Effi seguía queriendo ver a Annie, hablar con ella y estrecharla contra su corazón. Y después de reflexionar sobre ello durante unos días, decidió por fin lo que haría.

A la mañana siguiente, luciendo un discreto vestido negro cuidadosamente elegido, se dirigió a Unter den Linden y se hizo anunciar a la esposa del ministro con una tarjeta en la que sólo decía «Effi von Innstetten, nacida Von Briest». No aparecía nada más en ella, tampoco el título de baronesa. «Su Excelencia le ruega que pase», y Effi siguió al criado hasta una antesala, donde se sentó y, pese a su nerviosismo, contempló detenidamente los cuadros que decoraban las paredes: en primer término, *La aurora* de Guido Reni, y enfrente unos grabados ingleses al aguatinta de unos originales de Benjamin West, llenos de luces y sombras. Uno de ellos representaba al rey Lear en el bosque en plena tempestad.

Effi estaba acabando de examinar los cuadros cuando se abrió la puerta de la sala contigua y una señora alta y esbelta, con una expresión amable y acogedora, se acercó a ella y le tendió la mano.

—¡Mi querida señora, qué alegría volver a verla!

Y diciendo esto, se sentó en el sofá y cogió a Effi de la mano para que tomara asiento a su lado.

Effi se sintió conmovida por tanta bondad. No había ni rastro de arrogancia o de reproche en sus gestos, y todo lo que expresaba aquel rostro era una humanidad comprensiva.

—¿Qué puedo hacer por usted? —preguntó la señora del ministro, volviendo a tomar la iniciativa.

A Effi le temblaron ligeramente los labios y por fin dijo:

—Lo que me trae aquí es una petición que tal vez pueda ver satisfecha con la ayuda de Su Excelencia. Tengo una hija de diez años a la que hace tres que no veo, y desearía mucho poder volver a verla.

La señora del ministro, tomándole de nuevo la mano, miró afectuosamente a Effi.

—Al decir que hace tres años que no la veo, no le he dicho toda la verdad. La vi hace tres días.

Y entonces Effi le describió con todo lujo de detalles su encuentro con Annie.

—¡Huir de mi propia hija…! Soy muy consciente de que en esta vida todos tenemos lo que nos merecemos, y no pretendo cambiar las cosas. Son como son, y no puedo esperar que sean de otro modo. Sin embargo, lo de no poder ver a mi hija es demasiado duro, y me gustaría poder hacerlo de vez en cuando. Pero no en secreto y a escondidas, sino con el conocimiento y el acuerdo de todas las partes implicadas.

—Con el conocimiento y el acuerdo de todas las partes implicadas —repitió la esposa del ministro—. Es decir, con el consentimiento de su esposo. Ya veo que quiere educar a la niña manteniéndola alejada de su madre, un modo de proceder sobre el que me guardaré mucho de emitir cualquier juicio. Tal vez tenga razón, y perdóneme el comentario, señora.

Effi asintió.

—Usted misma encuentra justificada la postura de su esposo, y lo que pide únicamente es la satisfacción de un sentimiento muy natural, tal vez el más hermoso de los sentimientos femeninos, o al menos es así como lo sentimos las mujeres. ¿No es eso?

—Exactamente.

—Y lo que me está pidiendo es que consiga autorización para poder ver de vez en cuando a la niña en su casa, a fin de intentar recuperar el corazón de su hija.

Effi expresó una vez más su asentimiento, mientras la esposa del ministro continuaba:

—Haré todo lo que esté en mi mano, querida señora. Pero no lo tendremos nada fácil. Su marido, y perdone que siga llamándolo así, no es un hombre que actúe movido por emociones o estados de ánimo, sino por principios, y renunciar a ellos, o incluso transigir momentáneamente como en este caso, le resultará difícil. Si no fuese así, su comportamiento y su manera de educar a la niña hubiesen sido muy distintos. Lo que para usted resulta muy duro, para él es lo correcto.

—Entonces, ¿Su Excelencia piensa que debería renunciar a mi petición?

—De ningún modo. Sólo quería explicar, por no decir justificar, el comportamiento de su marido, y al mismo tiempo quería dejar constancia de las dificultades con que probablemente nos encontraremos. Sin embargo, creo que lo lograremos. Porque nosotras, las mujeres, cuando somos suficientemente inteligentes en nuestros planteamientos y no tensamos demasiado la cuerda, podemos conseguir muchas cosas. Además, su esposo pertenece al círculo de mis admiradores y, si le hago una petición, le resultará difícil negarse. Mañana tenemos una pequeña reunión en la que me veré con él. Dentro de dos días recibirá usted por la mañana unas líneas mías comunicándole si he sido lo bastante inteligente en mi planteamiento, es decir, si he conseguido o no lo que buscamos. Aunque creo que tendremos éxito, y que podrá volver a ver a su hija y disfrutar de vez en cuando de su compañía. Al parecer es una niña preciosa. Y no me extraña.

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Al cabo de dos días, tal como había prometido la señora del ministro, llegó la tan esperada nota, que Effi leyó:

> Me complace, querida señora, poder darle buenas noticias. Todo ha salido tal como deseábamos. Su señor esposo es hombre demasiado mundano para rechazar la petición de una señora. Pero, al mismo tiempo, no debo ocultarle que he notado claramente que su «sí» no se correspondía con lo que él considera justo y correcto. Pero, en fin, no critiquemos cuando lo que tenemos que hacer es alegrarnos. Hemos acordado que su Annie irá a verla hacia el mediodía. Que la buena estrella guíe su reencuentro.

Effi recibió estas líneas en el segundo correo, así que apenas faltaban dos horas escasas hasta la llegada de Annie. Era un tiempo muy corto, pero al mismo tiempo demasiado largo para Effi, que paseaba nerviosa arriba y abajo por las habitaciones, entrando y saliendo de la cocina, donde hablaba con Roswitha de cualquier tema: de la hiedra en la iglesia de enfrente, que el año que viene ya habría cubierto por completo las vidrieras; del portero, que otra vez había cerrado mal la espita del gas (un día de estos volarían por los aires); de que tal vez deberían volver a comprar el petróleo en la tienda grande de suministros de la Unter den Linden, en vez de en la de Anhaltstrasse… Habló de todo menos de Annie, porque no quería dejar traslucir el miedo, la inquietud que experimentaba, a pesar de las líneas de la señora del ministro, o tal vez justamente debido a ellas.

Dieron las doce. Por fin, sonó tímidamente el timbre, y Roswitha comprobó quién era por la mirilla. En efecto, era Annie. Roswitha le dio un beso, pero no dijo nada, y sin hacer apenas ruido, como si hubiera un enfermo en la casa, condujo a la niña desde el vestíbulo a la habitación de atrás, y después hasta la puerta que daba a la de delante.

—Anda, entra, Annie.

Y con estas palabras, y a fin de no estorbar, dejó a la niña y se volvió a la cocina.

Cuando la niña entró, Effi estaba de pie en el otro extremo de la habitación, de espaldas al espejo de pared.

—¡Annie!

Pero Annie no se movió de la puerta apenas entornada, en parte cohibida y en parte de forma tal vez intencionada, y Effi corrió hacia la niña, la levantó en el aire y la besó.

—¡Annie, hija mía, qué alegría tan grande! ¡Vamos, ven aquí y cuéntame cosas!

Y tomó a Annie de la mano para conducirla hasta el sofá. Pero Annie no se sentó, y continuó de pie mirando tímidamente a su madre, aferrando con la mano izquierda la punta del mantel que cubría la mesa.

—¿Sabes que te vi un día?

—Sí, a mí también me lo pareció.

—Y ahora explícame cosas. ¡Cuánto has crecido! ¿Y esta es la cicatriz? Roswitha me lo contó todo. Siempre has sido un poco alocada y descuidada cuando estás jugando. Eso lo has heredado de tu madre, yo también era así. ¿Y cómo vas en la escuela? Me imagino que serás la primera en todo, tienes todo el aspecto de ser una alumna ejemplar y de sacar siempre las mejores notas. También me he enterado de que la señorita Von Wedelstädt habla maravillas de ti. Eso está muy bien; yo también quería ser siempre la mejor, pero no iba a un colegio tan bueno como el tuyo. La mitología era mi fuerte. ¿Cuál es el tuyo?

—No lo sé.

—¡Oh, seguro que lo sabes! Esas cosas se saben. ¿En qué sacas las mejores notas?

—En religión.

—¿Ves como sí lo sabes? Eso está muy bien; yo no era muy buena en religión, pero tal vez era por culpa de las clases. Sólo teníamos a un ordenando.

—También nosotras teníamos uno.

—¿Ya no lo tenéis?

Annie dijo que no con la cabeza.

—¿Y por qué se ha ido?

—No lo sé. Ahora volvemos a tener al pastor.

—Y seguro que todas lo apreciáis mucho.

—Sí. Hay dos niñas del curso superior que van a convertirse.

—Ah, ya veo. Eso está muy bien, ¿no? ¿Y cómo está Johanna?

—Johanna me ha acompañado hasta la puerta…

—¿Y por qué no la has hecho subir?

—Ha dicho que prefería quedarse abajo y esperarme junto a la iglesia de enfrente.

—¿Y te recogerá ahí?

—Sí.

—Bueno, esperemos que no se impaciente. Hay un pequeño jardín delante, y las ventanas están ya medio cubiertas de hiedra, como si fuese una iglesia antigua.

—Pero no me gustaría hacerla esperar…

—Ah, ya veo que eres muy considerada. Eso es algo que me agrada. Siempre que se tengan en cuenta las prioridades… Y dime, ¿cómo está Rollo?

—Rollo está muy bien. Pero papá dice que se ha vuelto muy perezoso. Siempre está tumbado al sol.

—No me extraña. Ya lo hacía cuando tú eras muy pequeña… Y dime, Annie, ya que hoy hemos vuelto a encontrarnos sólo un ratito, ¿vendrás a visitarme más a menudo?

—Si me dan permiso, sí.

—Podríamos ir a pasear por el parque del Príncipe Alberto.

—Si me dan permiso, sí.

—O podríamos ir al Schilling a tomar un helado, de piña o de vainilla, que eran los que más me gustaban.

—Si me dan permiso, sí.

Y este tercer «Si me dan permiso, sí» fue la gota que colmó el vaso. Effi se levantó de golpe y una mirada de encendida indignación cayó sobre la niña.

—Creo que ya es la hora, Annie. Johanna debe de estar impaciente.

Hizo sonar la campanilla. Roswitha, que estaba en la habitación de al lado, entró al momento.

—Roswitha, acompaña a Annie a la iglesia de enfrente, donde Johanna la espera. Confío en que no haya cogido frío. Sentiría mucho que se resfriara. Dale recuerdos.

Y las dos salieron de la habitación.

En cuanto Roswitha cerró la puerta, Effi, que sentía como si se ahogara, se aflojó el vestido y rompió a reír de forma convulsa. «¡Así que este era el reencuentro que tanto había esperado!», y dirigiéndose apresuradamente hacia la ventana la abrió de par en par. Después buscó algo que pudiera confortarla, y lo encontró. Al lado de la ventana había una estantería con algunos libros de Schiller y Körner, y encima de los volúmenes de poesía, todos de la misma altura, una Biblia y un libro de oraciones. Los cogió, porque necesitaba algo delante de lo cual rezar, los colocó sobre la mesa, justo en el borde del que Annie no se había separado, y se arrodilló ante ellos. Luego dijo en voz baja:

—Oh, Dios que estás en los cielos, perdóname lo que hice, sólo era una niña… Pero no, no era ninguna niña, porque ya tenía edad suficiente para saber lo que hacía. Y lo sabía, y no pretendo mitigar mi culpa… pero esto es demasiado. Porque con el comportamiento de mi hija, no eres tú, Dios mío, quien quiere castigarme, sino él, ¡y sólo él! Yo creía que él tenía un alma noble y siempre me sentí pequeña a su lado, pero ahora lo sé: el pequeño es él, y como es pequeño es cruel. Todo lo que es pequeño es cruel. Eso se lo ha enseñado él a la niña, siempre haciendo de maestro, de educador. Así es como lo llamó Crampas, por aquel entonces medio en broma, pero tenía mucha razón… «Si me dan permiso, sí». Pues no hace falta que te lo den. No quiero volver a saber nada de vosotros, os odio, también a mi propia hija. Esto ya sobrepasa cualquier límite.

¡Un arribista, eso es lo que siempre ha sido, nada más! ¡Honor, honor, honor…! Y mató a aquel pobre hombre, al que ni siquiera quise y al que ya había olvidado, porque no le quería. No fueron más que tonterías, y la consecuencia, sangre y muerte. Y yo soy la culpable. Y ahora me envía a la niña porque a la esposa de un ministro no puede negarle nada, y antes de enviármela la amaestra como a un loro y le enseña a decir: «Si me dejan, sí». Me repugna pensar en lo que hice, pero más me repugna aún toda vuestra virtud. ¡No quiero saber nada más de vosotros! Tengo que vivir, pero confío en que no dure mucho.

Cuando Roswitha volvió, encontró a Effi yaciendo en el suelo y con la cara vuelta, como sin vida.

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Se avisó a Rummschüttel, quien, tras examinar a Effi, encontró su estado bastante preocupante. La tisis, que desde hacía algún tiempo venía observando en ella, parecía haberse agudizado y, lo que era peor, se había complicado con los primeros síntomas de una enfermedad nerviosa. Las maneras tranquilas y amistosas de Rummschüttel, a las que sabía inyectar una ligera dosis de humor desenfadado, ayudaron a serenarse a Effi. Cuando finalmente Roswitha acompañó al doctor al vestíbulo, le dijo:

—¡Dios mío, señor consejero, tengo mucho miedo de que esto vuelva a suceder! ¡Y puede repetirse en cualquier momento! Ya nunca más volveré a estar tranquila. Pero es que lo que ha pasado con la niña ha sido espantoso. ¡Pobre señora mía!

¡Y tan joven, cuando otras apenas empiezan a vivir…!

—No piense más en eso, Roswitha, ya verá como todo se arreglará. Pero ella tiene que salir de aquí. Debemos buscarle un ambiente distinto, otros aires, otra gente.

Al cabo de dos días llegó a Hohen-Cremmen una carta que decía:

> Estimada señora:
>
> Confío en que mis antiguas relaciones de amistad con las casas de Briest y Belling, y el sincero afecto que siento por su señora hija, sirvan para justificar estas líneas. Las cosas no pueden continuar así para su hija. Si no hacemos algo pronto para arrancarla de la vida triste y solitaria que lleva desde hace años, se consumirá. Siempre he observado en ella una tendencia a padecer de tisis, por lo que hace años aconsejé su traslado a Ems, pero su dolencia se ha complicado ahora con un trastorno nervioso. Para frenar el avance de la enfermedad, sería necesario un cambio de aires. Pero ¿adónde? No sería difícil escoger algún balneario en Silesia: Salzbrunn estaría bien, y Reinerz incluso mejor para su alteración nerviosa. Pero sin lugar a dudas lo mejor para ella sería instalarse en Hohen-Cremmen, ya que lo que podría curar a su hija, señora, no es sólo un cambio de aires; se está consumiendo porque no tiene a nadie más que a Roswitha. La fidelidad de una criada es algo muy hermoso, pero el amor de unos padres lo es mucho más. Perdone a este viejo por inmiscuirse en asuntos que van más allá de la estricta competencia profesional, pero también me veo obligado a hablarle como médico y, perdone la expresión, a hacerle este requerimiento. He visto tantas cosas en la vida… Pero no quiero molestarla más. Le ruego que salude de mi parte a su señor esposo, y reciba la más respetuosa consideración de su seguro servidor,
>
> DR. RUMMSCHÜTTEL

La señora Von Briest leyó la carta a su marido. Estaban sentados en la galería embaldosada, de espaldas a la sala y de cara a la rotonda y al reloj de sol. El emparrado que trepaba alrededor de la ventana se movía suavemente con la brisa, y sobre el estanque se veía el refulgir de un par de libélulas.

Briest guardó silencio, repiqueteando con los dedos sobre la mesa de té.

—Por favor, deja de tamborilear y di algo.

—¿Qué quieres que diga, Luise? Me parece que el gesto de tamborilear ya es bastante elocuente de por sí. Hace mucho tiempo que sabes lo que pienso de todo esto. Cuando llegó la carta de Innstetten, que cayó como un relámpago del cielo, opinaba lo mismo que tú. Pero desde entonces ha pasado una eternidad. ¿Quieres que siga representando el papel de gran inquisidor hasta el fin de mis días? Si he de serte sincero, llevo haciéndolo mucho tiempo y ya estoy bastante harto…

—No me hagas reproches, Briest. Yo la quiero tanto como tú, quizá más. Cada uno la quiere a su manera. Pero no estamos en el mundo sólo para ser débiles y tolerantes, y para mostrarnos indulgentes con lo que va contra la ley y los mandamientos, con lo que la gente condena y, al menos de momento, con toda la razón.

—Oh, vamos… Hay una cosa más fuerte que todo eso.

—¿Ah, sí? ¿Y cuál es?

—El amor de los padres por sus hijos. Y cuando sólo se tiene una…

—Entonces hay que prescindir del catecismo, de la moral y de las exigencias de la sociedad.

—Puedes decir cuanto quieras del catecismo, Luise, pero no me hables de la sociedad.

—Es muy difícil prescindir de la sociedad.

—También lo es prescindir de una hija. Y créeme, Luise: cuando quiere, la sociedad puede también cerrar los ojos. Así es como veo yo la cosa: que los Rathenow quieren venir, por mí estupendo; que no quieren venir, lo mismo. Sencillamente voy a enviar un telegrama diciendo: «Effi, ven». ¿Estás de acuerdo?

Ella se levantó y le dio un beso en la frente.

—Pues claro que lo estoy. Pero no me hagas reproches. No es un paso fácil el que vamos a dar. A partir de ahora, nuestra vida será muy diferente.

—Podré soportarlo. La cosecha de colza se presenta bien, y en el otoño podré cazar alguna liebre. Todavía me gusta el vino tinto, y cuando tenga a mi hija en casa aún me gustará más… Me voy ahora mismo a poner el telegrama.

Ya hacía más de medio año que Effi vivía en Hohen-Cremmen. Ocupaba las dos habitaciones del primer piso, las mismas que cuando venía de visita. La más grande la habían arreglado para ella, y en la de al lado dormía Roswitha. Los efectos benéficos que Rummschüttel había esperado conseguir con el cambio de residencia se habían obtenido, en la medida de lo posible. Los accesos de tos habían disminuido, y también desapareció la expresión amarga que había restado buena parte del encanto de su rostro. Y llegaron los días en que la risa volvió a aflorar a sus labios. Apenas se hablaba de Kessin y de nada referente al pasado, con la excepción de la señora Von Padden y, naturalmente, de Gieshübler, por quien el viejo Briest sentía gran admiración. «Ese Alonzo, ese español salido de *Preziosa*, que tiene en casa a un Mirambo y está criando a una Trippelli, tiene por fuerza que ser un genio, y nadie me lo quitará de la cabeza». Y entonces Effi tenía que ponerse a imitar a Gieshübler, con el sombrero en la mano, sus cortesías y sus inacabables reverencias, algo que ella remedaba a la perfección gracias a su talento burlesco, pero que no le gustaba hacer porque le parecía injusto hacia aquel viejo tan bondadoso y querido. No se hablaba nunca de Innstetten ni de Annie, aun cuando esta era la legítima heredera de Hohen-Cremmen.

Así pues, Effi iba volviendo a la vida, y la madre, que, como mujer, tenía una tendencia muy femenina a considerar todo el asunto, por doloroso que fuera, como un caso interesante, rivalizaba con su marido en sus manifestaciones de amor y atención hacia su hija.

«Hacía tiempo que no teníamos un invierno tan bueno como este», decía Briest de vez en cuando, y entonces Effi se levantaba de su silla y con una suave caricia le apartaba el escaso pelo que le caía sobre la frente. Pero, por hermoso que pudiera parecer todo esto, la buena salud de Effi era sólo aparente, ya que en realidad la enfermedad seguía su curso y le iba consumiendo silenciosamente la vida. Cuando, vestida con una especie de bata a rayas azules y blancas con un cinturón suelto, como en el día que se prometió a Innstetten, se acercaba con paso rápido y elástico para dar a sus padres los buenos días, estos la miraban agradablemente sorprendidos, pero también con melancolía, porque tenían muy claro que no era la juventud, sino una especie de transfiguración, la que confería aquel aspecto tan singular a la esbelta figura y a los ojos brillantes de su hija. Quienes la observaban con atención podían percibirlo, y ella era la única que no se daba cuenta, totalmente entregada a la felicidad de volver a vivir en un lugar tan apacible y tranquilo, reconciliada con el amor de aquellos a los que siempre había querido y que siempre la habían querido, incluso en los años de su desgracia y proscripción.

Effi se ocupaba de hacer cosas en la casa, adornándola e introduciendo todo tipo de mejoras. No en vano poseía un gusto exquisito que hacía que todas sus decisiones fueran acertadas. Pero había abandonado por completo la lectura y, sobre todo, cualquier actividad relacionada con la pintura. «Le he dedicado tanto tiempo, que ahora estoy contenta de poder estar tranquilamente mano sobre mano». Sin duda era algo que le hacía evocar sus días más desdichados. En cambio, ahora dedicaba mucho tiempo a la contemplación en extasiado silencio de la naturaleza. Cuando veía caer las primeras hojas de los plátanos, los rayos del sol centelleando sobre el hielo del estanque, o los primeros crocus floreciendo en la rotonda sumida todavía en el invierno, sentía un inefable bienestar que confortaba su espíritu, y se podía pasar horas contemplando todo aquello y olvidando lentamente lo que la vida le había negado o, tal vez más exactamente, todo aquello que ella misma había arrojado por la borda.

Recibían algunas visitas, ya que no todo el mundo había mostrado un rechazo total, pero la gente con la que más se relacionaba era la de la escuela y la parroquia.

El hecho de que las gemelas ya no vivieran allí no supuso un gran inconveniente, porque de todos modos las cosas ya no habrían sido lo mismo. Pero las relaciones con el padre, su viejo amigo Jahnke, eran

mejores que nunca. El maestro consideraba territorio escandinavo no sólo la Pomerania sueca, sino también la comarca de Kessin, y no paraba de hacerle preguntas sobre aquellas tierras.

—Sí, Jahnke, en Kessin teníamos un vapor y, como creo que le dije por carta, o puede que se lo contara de palabra, estuve a punto de ir a Wisby. ¡Imagínese, hasta Wisby! Es curioso, hay muchas cosas en mi vida de las que puedo decir que «he estado a punto».

—¡Qué lástima! —dijo Jahnke.

—Sí que fue una lástima. Pero recorrí toda la zona de Rügen. Y aquello sí que le hubiera gustado, Jahnke. Imagínese, Arkona, con los restos aún visibles de un inmenso poblado sorbio, o al menos eso dicen, porque yo no llegué tan lejos. Y cerca de allí está el lago Hertha, con sus nenúfares blancos y amarillos. Me acordé mucho de su Hertha…

—Sí, claro, Hertha… Pero iba a hablarme del lago Hertha…

—Sí, a eso iba. Imagínese, Jahnke, al lado mismo del lago había dos grandes piedras de sacrificio, dos losas que todavía tenían los surcos por los que antiguamente corría la sangre. Desde entonces siento antipatía por los sorbios.

—Perdone, señora, pero aquellos no eran los sorbios. Lo de las piedras de sacrificio del lago Hertha fue mucho antes, incluso antes de Jesucristo; eran germánicos puros, de los cuales todos nosotros descendemos…

—Por supuesto —dijo Effi riendo—, de los cuales todos nosotros descendemos; los Jahnke seguro, y puede que también los Briest.

Y Effi dejó estar el tema de Rügen y del lago Hertha, interesándose por sus nietos y preguntándole a cuáles quería más, si a los de Bertha o a los de Hertha.

Sí, Effi se llevaba muy bien con Jahnke. Pero, pese a todos sus conocimientos sobre el lago Hertha, Escandinavia y Wisby, en el fondo era un hombre simple, y por tanto era inevitable que una mujer joven y solitaria como Effi prefiriese la conversación de Niemeyer. Durante el otoño pudieron hablar tranquilamente dando largos paseos por el parque, pero la llegada del invierno interrumpió sus agradables charlas, ya que a Effi no le apetecía en absoluto ir a la casa parroquial. La señora Niemeyer siempre había sido una mujer muy desagradable, pero ahora había adoptado una actitud de intolerancia moral difícilmente soportable, pese a que, en opinión de la comunidad de feligreses, no había sido ella ningún modelo de honestidad intachable.

Y con gran pesar por parte de Effi, esta interrupción se prolongó durante todo el invierno. Pero cuando a principios de abril los arbustos comenzaron a reverdecer y los senderos del parque se secaron, volvieron a retomar sus paseos.

Durante uno de estos oyeron el canto lejano del cuco, y Effi contó las veces que repetía su reclamo. Iba cogida del brazo de Niemeyer, y le dijo:

—¿Oye cantar al cuco? A él no puedo preguntárselo, pero dígame usted, amigo mío, ¿qué piensa de la vida?

—¡Ah, querida Effi, no me hagas estas preguntas tan transcendentes! Deberías consultar a un filósofo, o enviar un escrito a una universidad. ¿Qué pienso yo de la vida? Mucho y poco. A veces pienso que es lo más importante, a veces que vale demasiado poco.

—Eso está bien, amigo mío, me gusta. No necesito saber nada más.

Mientras tanto, habían llegado hasta el columpio. Effi se subió a él con la misma agilidad de cuando era una niña, y antes de que su viejo acompañante se hubiera repuesto de su momentáneo sobresalto, la joven ya se había colocado en cuclillas entre las dos cuerdas y, balanceando hábilmente su cuerpo adelante y atrás, había empezado a columpiarse. Al cabo de unos segundos ya volaba por los aires y, sosteniéndose con una sola mano, se quitó con la otra el pequeño pañolón de seda que le cubría el cuello y el pecho, y lo agitó en el aire, revoltosa y feliz. Luego empezó a balancearse más despacio, bajó de un salto y se cogió nuevamente del brazo de Niemeyer.

—¡Effi, sigues siendo la misma de siempre!

—Oh, no. Ya me gustaría, pero todo eso ha quedado muy atrás. Sólo he querido volver a probarlo otra vez. ¡Ah, qué hermoso ha sido, qué bien me he sentido! ¡Era como si volara hasta el cielo! Quién sabe si entraré en él. Dígamelo usted, amigo mío, usted debe saberlo. Por favor, por favor…

Niemeyer tomó la cabeza de Effi entre sus ancianas manos, le dio un beso en la frente y le dijo con voz serena:

—Sí, Effi, entrarás.

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Effi se pasaba el día en el parque, ya que sentía la necesidad de respirar aire puro. El viejo doctor Wiesike, de Friesack, estaba de acuerdo, pero le daba quizá demasiada libertad para hacer a su antojo, así que, en los fríos días del mes de mayo, Effi cogió un fuerte resfriado. Tenía fiebre y tosía mucho, y el doctor, que por lo general se pasaba cada tres días, ahora la visitaba a diario y parecía preocupado. No sabía cómo atajar el mal, ya que los medicamentos contra el insomnio y la tos que requería Effi no podían serle administrados a causa de la fiebre.

—Doctor —preguntó el viejo Briest—, ¿cómo va a acabar todo esto? Usted la conoce desde niña, la vio nacer. A mí me da muy mala espina; veo cómo pierde peso por días, y también veo esas manchas rojas, y ese fulgor en sus ojos cuando me dirige de pronto una mirada llena de preguntas. ¿Qué opina usted?

¿Qué cree que pasará? ¿Va a morir?

Wiesike movió lentamente la cabeza.

—Yo no diría tanto, señor Von Briest. La fiebre no me gusta nada, pero ya haremos que baje, y después la enviaremos a Suiza o a Menton. Aire puro e impresiones agradables que le hagan olvidar lo pasado…

—El Leteo, el Leteo…

—Sí, el Leteo —sonrió Wiesike—. Lástima que los antiguos griegos nos hayan dejado sólo el vocablo y no, ya de paso, la fuente del río…

—O, por lo menos, la receta del agua, porque ahora en los laboratorios se preparan excelentes aguas curativas. Caramba, Wiesike, eso sí que sería un buen negocio. Si pudiésemos abrir aquí uno de esos sanatorios… «Friesack, la fuente del olvido». Bueno, de momento, probaremos con la Riviera. Menton está en la Riviera, ¿no? Ahora los precios de los cereales han vuelto a caer, pero si se tiene que hacer, debe hacerse. Hablaré con mi mujer.

Lo hizo, y encontró la inmediata aprobación de su esposa. Recientemente, y debido tal vez a la vida retirada que había llevado en los últimos tiempos, se había despertado en ella un ardiente deseo de viajar hacia el sur, y eso contribuyó sin duda a aceptar la propuesta. No obstante, fue Effi la que se negó en redondo.

—¡Qué buenos sois conmigo! Y yo sería lo bastante egoísta para aceptar vuestro sacrificio si pensara que iba a servirme de algo. Pero estoy segura de que lo único que haría sería perjudicarme.

—Eso son simples suposiciones tuyas, Effi.

—No. Me he vuelto demasiado susceptible y cualquier cosa me irrita. Aquí no, porque no dejáis de mimarme y de hacerme la vida sencilla y agradable. Pero lejos de casa eso no sería posible, porque se producirían numerosas situaciones desagradables que no se pueden evitar, empezando con el revisor del tren y acabando con el camarero del hotel. Sólo de pensar en los rostros arrogantes de esas gentes ya me sulfuro. No, no, dejadme aquí. No quiero volver a salir de Hohen-Cremmen. Este es mi lugar. Prefiero el heliotropo y el reloj de sol de la rotonda que todo lo que haya en Menton.

Después de esta conversación renunciaron al proyecto, y Wiesike, pese a haber depositado grandes esperanzas en la Riviera, dijo:

—Hay que respetar su postura, ya que no se trata de un simple capricho. Esta clase de enfermos poseen una sensibilidad muy acusada y perciben con notable acierto lo que les conviene y lo que no. Y eso que ha dicho sobre los revisores y los camareros es muy cierto. Y no hay aires, por puros y curativos que sean, que compensen la irritación que pueden causar los hoteles cuando estás tan susceptible. Así pues, dejemos que se quede aquí. Si bien no es lo mejor, sin duda tampoco es lo peor.

Y, en efecto, Effi se recuperó, ganó algo de peso (el viejo Briest era un fanático de la báscula) y ya no se mostraba tan irritable. Pero cada vez sentía más necesidad de aire, y especialmente los días en que soplaba viento del oeste y el cielo se cubría de nubes grises, se pasaba horas al aire libre. Paseaba por los campos y por las marismas, y en ocasiones llegaba a caminar hasta tres kilómetros. Cuando se fatigaba se sentaba en

un seto y, perdida en sus ensueños, contemplaba los ranúnculos y las matas de acedera rojas que se agitaban al viento.

—Vas siempre demasiado sola —le advirtió un día la señora Von Briest—. De la gente de por aquí no tienes que temer nada, pero hay mucha chusma forastera por esos caminos…

Estas palabras impresionaron a Effi, que no había pensado hasta entonces en la posibilidad de que hubiera peligro, y cuando estuvo a solas con Roswitha le dijo:

—Contigo no puedo contar mucho, Roswitha, te has puesto demasiado gorda y las piernas ya no te llevan.

—No exagere, señora, que no estoy tan floja. Aún podría casarme.

—Claro que sí —repuso Effi, riendo—, eso siempre se puede. Pero lo que me gustaría, Roswitha, es tener un perro que me acompañase. El perro de caza de papá no me tiene ningún apego. Esos perros no son muy listos, y este sólo se mueve cuando el cazador o el jardinero se pone la escopeta al hombro. Me acuerdo tanto de Rollo…

—Sí —dijo Roswitha—, aquí no hay ningún perro como Rollo. Con eso no quiero decir nada en contra de Hohen-Cremmen. Aquí se está la mar de bien.

Tres o cuatro días después de esta conversación entre Effi y Roswitha, Innstetten entraba en su despacho una hora antes de lo habitual. El sol, que aquella mañana brillaba con fuerza, le había despertado, y como sabía que no volvería a coger el sueño decidió levantarse para acabar un trabajo pendiente.

Eran las ocho y cuarto. Hizo sonar la campanilla y poco después apareció Johanna con la bandeja del desayuno, sobre la cual, junto con los periódicos, el *Kreuzzeitung* y el *Norddeutsche Allgemeine*, había un par de cartas. Echó un vistazo a los sobres, y en uno de ellos reconoció la letra del ministro. Pero ¿y el otro? El matasellos no se leía claramente. Y el tratamiento de «Honorable señor barón Von Innstetten» de la dirección revelaba un alegre desconocimiento de las costumbres del país. También estaba en consonancia la caligrafía, de un carácter muy primitivo. En cambio, la dirección era sorprendentemente precisa: «W. Keithstrasse
1 C,
segundo piso».

Innstetten tenía el suficiente espíritu de burócrata para abrir en primer lugar la carta de «Su Excelencia»: «Mi querido Innstetten: Me complace poder comunicarle que Su Majestad se ha dignado firmar su nombramiento, por lo que le felicito sinceramente». Las amables líneas del ministro alegraron a Innstetten casi más que el mismo nombramiento, ya que, desde aquella mañana en Kessin, en la que Crampas se había despedido de él con aquella mirada que no había conseguido olvidar, se había vuelto mucho más crítico y escéptico respecto a la idea de medrar y hacer carrera. Desde entonces medía las cosas mundanas por otro rasero, y lo miraba todo de modo diferente. Al fin y al cabo, ¿qué eran los honores? Durante todo aquel tiempo que había ido pasando para él cada vez más desprovisto de alegría, en más de una ocasión había recordado una anécdota ministerial casi olvidada de los días del viejo Ladenberg, quien al recibir tras una larga espera la condecoración del Águila Roja, la arrojó furioso a un rincón exclamando: «¡Quédate ahí hasta que te vuelvas negra!». Probablemente acabó volviéndose negra, pero sin duda ocurrió demasiado tarde y sin que el condecorado se viera realmente satisfecho. Todo lo que pueda hacernos ilusión está ligado al momento y a las circunstancias, y lo que hoy todavía nos hace felices, mañana carece de todo valor. Innstetten era plenamente consciente de ello, y por mucho que apreciase los honores y distinciones de las altas esferas, o cuando menos los hubiese apreciado en otra época, ahora sabía que de la brillante apariencia de las cosas se puede esperar bien poco, y que lo que denominamos «felicidad», si es que existe, no tiene nada que ver con ese fulgor aparente. «La felicidad, si no ando equivocado, consiste en dos cosas: la primera, ocupar siempre el lugar que te corresponde (pero ¿qué funcionario puede decir eso de sí mismo?), y la segunda y más importante, poder disfrutar sin molestias de las pequeñas cosas de la vida, como dormir bien o que no te aprieten los zapatos. Si los setecientos veinte minutos de una jornada de doce horas transcurren sin motivo alguno de enojo o desagrado, entonces ya puedes decir que ha sido un día feliz». Y en un día como aquel, también el estado de ánimo de Innstetten le llevaba a reflexionar de forma tan pesimista. Entonces cogió la segunda carta. Después de leerla, se pasó la mano por la frente y sintió con dolorosa lucidez que existía la felicidad, que él la había tenido, pero que ya no volvería a tenerla nunca más.

Johanna entró y anunció:

—El consejero Wüllersdorf.

De hecho ya estaba en el umbral de la puerta.

—Enhorabuena, Innstetten.

—Sé que usted lo dice sinceramente. Los demás se sentirán muy molestos. Pero en fin…

—¿Qué quiere decir con eso? No creo que sea el momento de poner pegas…

—No. El favor de Su Majestad me abruma, y los benevolentes sentimientos del ministro, a quien se lo debo todo, más si cabe.

—Pero…

—Pero ya he olvidado lo que es alegrarse. Si le dijese esto a alguien que no fuese usted, le parecería pura retórica, pero usted sabe que es cierto. Mire este lugar, todo está vacío y desolado. Cuando veo entrar a Johanna, de quien todo el mundo dice que es una joya, me entra como una especie de angustia. Todo ese aire teatral —e Innstetten imitó los gestos de Johanna—, esa grotesca puesta en escena, alzando el busto de forma tan pretenciosa, no sé si ante la humanidad o ante mí… Todo me parece tan triste y deplorable, que, si no fuese tan ridícula, sería para pegarle un tiro.

—Querido Innstetten, ¿y con ese estado de ánimo va a hacerse cargo de la dirección ministerial?

—¿Y cómo quiere que me encuentre? Mire, acabo de recibir esta carta.

Wüllersdorf cogió la segunda carta con el matasellos ilegible, le hizo mucha gracia lo de «honorable señor» y se acercó a la ventana para leer con mayor comodidad.

Señor:

Le extrañará a usted que yo le escriba, pero es a causa de Rollo. La pequeña Annie nos dijo el año pasado que Rollo se había vuelto muy perezoso, pero eso no es lo que importa. Puede ser tan gandul como quiera, cuanto más mejor. ¡Pero la señora se pondría tan contenta…! Cuando sale a pasear por el campo o por las marismas, siempre me dice: «Tengo miedo, Roswitha, estoy tan sola… Pero ¿quién me puede acompañar? Rollo sí que lo haría, él no me guarda ningún rencor. Esa es la ventaja de los animales, que nuestras cosas no les preocupan». Esas son las palabras de la señora, y es lo único que tenía que decirle, tan sólo pedirle que dé muchos recuerdos de mi parte a la pequeña Annie. Y a Johanna también. Su fiel y devota servidora,

ROSWITHA GELLENHAGEN

—Sí —dijo Wüllersdorf, doblando nuevamente la carta—, esa mujer estaba muy por encima de nosotros.

—Yo también lo creo así.

—Y ese es el motivo de que le encuentre hoy tan escéptico con respecto a todo.

—Así es. Ya hace tiempo que le vengo dando vueltas, y estas simples palabras, con su deliberada o tal vez involuntaria acusación, han acabado por llevarme al límite. Hace tiempo que me atormenta todo esto, y no sé cómo salir de ello. Ya nada me complace, y cuantos más honores y distinciones recibo, más cuenta me doy de que no valen nada. Mi vida está deshecha, y llevo tiempo pensando que debería renunciar por completo a toda ambición y vanidad y emplear mi talento como maestro de escuela, que seguramente es lo que en el fondo soy, para convertirme en una especie de preceptor moral. Y no sería el primero. Si fuese posible, debería convertirme en un personaje tan tremendamente célebre como el doctor Wichern, de la Rahuen Haus de Hamburgo, aquel hombre milagroso que con su mirada y su ejemplar piedad dominaba a los criminales…

—Hummm… no me parecería mal. ¿Y por qué no?

—No. No podría ser. Ni siquiera eso. Para mí no hay salida posible. ¿Cómo podría llegar yo, precisamente yo, al alma de un asesino? Para eso es preciso estar libre de culpa. Y si tienes sobre la conciencia ese lastre y las manos manchadas de sangre, lo menos que puedes hacer es saber representar ante el cofrade a quien quieres redimir el papel del penitente arrepentido y ofrecerle el gran espectáculo de una gigantesca contrición.

Wüllersdorf asintió.

—¿Lo ve? También usted está de acuerdo. Pero yo no puedo hacer nada de todo eso. Soy incapaz de ponerme el hábito de penitente, y mucho menos el de faquir o derviche y danzar frenéticamente acusándome a mí mismo hasta caer muerto. Y, en vista de que nada de eso es posible, he llegado a la conclusión de que lo mejor que podría hacer sería marcharme de aquí, muy lejos, entre gentes que son más negras que el betún y no saben nada de la cultura ni del honor. ¡Dichosos ellos…! Porque precisamente eso, esas memeces, son las culpables de todo. Esas cosas no se hacen por pasión, lo cual, al fin y al cabo, sería disculpable. Se hacen por ideas… ¡Ideas! Y entonces acabas con otro hombre, y luego acabas contigo mismo. Y eso es aún peor.

—Oh, vamos, Innstetten, eso no son más que tonterías, ideas que se le meten a uno en la cabeza. ¡Irse al

África! ¿A quién se le ocurre? Eso estaría bien para un teniente cargado de deudas. ¡Pero para un hombre como usted…! ¿Es que quiere presidir el palaver de la tribu con un fez rojo en la cabeza, o hacerse hermano de sangre del yerno del rey Mtesa? ¿O acaso quiere atravesar sin mapa el Congo con un salacot de seis agujeros hasta salir al Camerún o algún sitio parecido? ¡Vamos, querido Innstetten, no diga tonterías! ¡Eso es imposible!

—¿Imposible? ¿Por qué? Y si eso es imposible, ¿qué puedo hacer?

—Sencillamente quedarse aquí y resignarse. ¿Quién no se ha visto alguna vez abrumado por las penas? ¿Hay alguien que no se haya dicho alguna vez: «No sé de qué va todo esto, no sé qué hacer con mi vida»? Usted sabe que yo también llevo mi pequeña carga a cuestas, no exactamente como la suya, pero tampoco mucho más ligera. Es absurdo pensar en arrastrarse por la selva o pasar la noche en un nido de termitas. Eso queda para quienes disfrutan con esas cosas, pero no para gente como nosotros. Lo que hay que hacer es mantenerse en la trinchera y aguantar hasta el final. Pero, antes de que llegue, debemos disfrutar al máximo de las pequeñas cosas de la vida, hasta las más nimias: ver abrirse las primeras violetas, o cómo se cubre de flores el monumento de la reina Luisa, o a las niñas saltando a la comba con sus borceguíes. O bien coger un coche hasta Potsdam y visitar la Friedenskirche, donde está enterrado el káiser Federico y donde ahora están empezando a erigirle un mausoleo. Y cuando esté allí, reflexione sobre la vida del emperador, y si eso no ayuda a serenar su alma, entonces es que realmente no tiene remedio.

—Sí, muy bien. Pero el año es muy largo, y hay que pasarlo día a día… y luego están las noches.

—Estas no son ningún problema. Ahora tenemos el *Sardanápalo*, o la *Coppélia*, donde baila la Dell'Era,
y al acabar podemos ir al Siechel. Hay mucha, muchísima gente que está en una situación parecida a la nuestra, y una de estas personas, que también había pasado por muchas contrariedades y vicisitudes en su vida, me dijo en una ocasión: «Créame, Wüllersdorf, los apuntalamientos son imprescindibles». Y quien me dijo esto sabía de lo que hablaba, ya que era un maestro de obras. Y tenía mucha razón. No pasa un día en que no me acuerde de los apuntalamientos.

Después de esta perorata, Wüllersdorf cogió el sombrero y el bastón. Innstetten, a quien las palabras de su amigo le habían hecho recordar sus anteriores reflexiones sobre la «felicidad de las pequeñas cosas», asintió con la cabeza y sonrió para sí.

—¿Y adónde va ahora, Wüllersdorf? Es demasiado temprano para ir al ministerio.

—Hoy me tomaré el día libre. Primero daré un paseo de una hora a lo largo del canal, hasta la esclusa de Charlottenburg, y volveré. Luego me pasaré un rato a ver a Huth, en la Potsdamerstrasse, y procuraré ir con cuidado al subir los escalones de madera. Abajo hay una tienda de flores.

—¿Y eso le hace feliz? ¿Le basta con eso?

—Yo no diría tanto, pero algo sí que ayuda. Allí hay una tertulia de bebedores matinales, cuyos nombres me callaré por prudencia. Uno habla del duque de Ratibor, otro del príncipe episcopal Kopp, y otro puede que incluso comente algo de Bismarck. Siempre te enteras de cosas. Las tres cuartas partes de lo que se cuenta allí son mentiras, pero, con tal de que sean ingeniosas, ya me está bien.

Y, diciendo esto, se marchó.

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El mes de mayo había sido espléndido, y el de junio todavía más, y Effi, después de sobreponerse a la primera sensación dolorosa que despertó en ella la llegada de Rollo, se sintió colmada de alegría por tener nuevamente a su lado al fiel animal. Todos elogiaron a Roswitha, y el viejo Briest, al comentar el hecho con su mujer, tuvo palabras de reconocimiento hacia Innstetten, al que siempre había tenido por todo un caballero, nada mezquino y de bien templado corazón. «Lástima que aquella estúpida historia les obligara a separarse. Sin duda, formaban un matrimonio ejemplar». El único que mantuvo la serenidad en todo aquel asunto del reencuentro fue el mismo Rollo, ya fuera porque carecía de noción del tiempo, ya fuera porque considerase aquella separación como un obstáculo que ahora sencillamente había desaparecido. Aunque tal vez tuviera mucho que ver el hecho de que era ya muy viejo. No se mostraba muy efusivo, como tampoco se había mostrado muy afectuoso cuando se produjo el reencuentro, pero su fidelidad, si es que eso era posible, había aumentado. No se separaba de su ama en ningún momento. Trataba al perro de caza con indulgencia, como a un ser de categoría inferior. Por la noche dormía en su estera delante de la puerta de Effi. Por la mañana, mientras desayunaban al aire libre, se tumbaba junto al reloj de sol, siempre tranquilo, siempre dormitando, pero cuando Effi se levantaba de la mesa y entraba en el vestíbulo para coger su sombrero de paja y su sombrilla, parecía como si Rollo recuperara su juventud. Sin preocuparse de si sus fuerzas se verían sometidas a una prueba grande o pequeña, corría arriba y abajo como loco por el camino del pueblo, y no se tranquilizaba hasta que salían por fin a los primeros campos. Effi, para quien era más importante el aire puro que la belleza del paisaje, evitaba las pequeñas incursiones por el bosque, y generalmente no se apartaba de la ancha avenida que, bordeada primero por olmos centenarios y luego, donde comenzaba la calzada, por álamos, conducía a la estación de ferrocarril. Caminaba durante más o menos una hora. Todo la alegraba, aspiraba con delectación el aroma a colza y trébol que emanaba de los campos, seguía con la mirada el vuelo de las alondras y contaba los pozos y los abrevaderos, desde donde le llegaba el suave tintineo de las esquilas del ganado que se acercaba a beber. Y entonces sentía que debía cerrar los ojos y dejarse arrastrar a un dulce olvido. Cerca de la estación, junto a la calzada, había una apisonadora. En aquel lugar Effi solía sentarse a descansar, y desde allí contemplaba el tráfico ferroviario, el ir y venir de los trenes, y en ocasiones veía dos fumarolas de vapor que durante un momento se solapaban y luego volvían a separarse a derecha e izquierda, hasta desaparecer finalmente detrás del pueblo y del bosquecillo. Rollo se sentaba a su lado y compartía el almuerzo de su ama, y tras cazar al vuelo el último bocado que ella le lanzaba, y tal vez para demostrar su agradecimiento, salía corriendo como un poseso por entre los surcos de los campos y sólo se detenía cuando conseguía que alguna pareja de perdices que incubaba sus huevos levantase espantada el vuelo.

—¡Qué verano tan hermoso…! Hace sólo un año, querida mamá, no hubiera imaginado que pudiera sentirme tan feliz.

Eso es lo que Effi solía decirle a su madre a diario mientras paseaban alrededor del estanque, o cuando arrancaba del árbol una manzana temprana a la que daba un pequeño mordisco con sus preciosos dientes. La señora Von Briest le acariciaba la mano y le decía:

—Lo que tienes que hacer, Effi, es volver a ponerte buena, buena del todo, y entonces serás feliz de verdad. Pero no como antes, sino de una manera distinta. Gracias a Dios, hay muchas clases de felicidad. Ya verás como encontraremos alguna para ti.

—¡Sois tan buenos conmigo…! Y, pensándolo bien, yo también he cambiado vuestras vidas, y os he hecho envejecer antes de tiempo.

—No digas eso, querida Effi. Cuando ocurrió aquello, yo también lo pensé, pero hoy sé que nuestra tranquilidad vale más que todo el ruido y el ajetreo de antes. Y si continúas así, todavía podremos viajar.

Cuando Wiesike propuso que fuéramos a Menton, estabas enferma e irritable, y tenías toda la razón en lo que dijiste sobre los revisores y los camareros. Pero cuando estés más recuperada y tus nervios se hayan calmado, entonces podremos ir porque ya no te incomodarán, más bien al contrario, te harán reír con sus aires de grandeza y sus cabellos tan rizados. Y podremos contemplar extasiadas el mar azul, las velas blancas y las rocas cubiertas de cactus rojos… que aunque no las he visto nunca, me las imagino así. Y me gustaría mucho poder conocer todo aquello.

Así pasó el verano, y con él también sus últimas noches de lluvias de estrellas. Durante estas, Effi se sentaba junto a la ventana y no se cansaba de mirar hasta bien pasada la medianoche. «Siempre fui una mala cristiana, pero tal vez sí que venimos de allí arriba y, cuando todo esto acabe, quizá volvamos a nuestra patria celestial, a las estrellas, ¡o incluso más allá! No lo sé, ni quiero saberlo, tan sólo lo anhelo».

Pobre Effi, se pasó demasiado tiempo contemplando y meditando sobre las maravillas del cielo. Y el aire de la noche y la humedad que subía del estanque la obligaron a guardar cama de nuevo, y cuando Wiesike fue avisado y la reconoció, llamó a Briest aparte y le dijo:

—No hay nada que hacer. Estén preparados, porque el final se acerca.

Y no dijo más que la verdad. Al cabo de unos días, no era aún muy tarde, no habían dado las diez, Roswitha bajó y dijo a la señora Von Briest:

—La señora está muy mal. Habla sola, a veces parece que esté rezando, pero como si no se diera cuenta de nada. No lo sé, pero me da la impresión de que va a morirse de un momento a otro.

—¿Crees que quiere hablar conmigo?

—No me ha dicho nada, pero creo que así lo desea. Ya sabe usted cómo es: no quiere molestarla ni asustarla, pero estaría bien que subiera.

—Muy bien, Roswitha —dijo la señora Von Briest—. Ahora mismo subo.

Antes de que el reloj empezara a dar las diez, la señora Von Briest subió la escalera y entró en la habitación de Effi, que estaba tendida en una *chaise longue* al lado de la ventana abierta.

La señora Von Briest acercó una pequeña silla negra con tres barrotes dorados en su respaldo de ébano, tomó la mano de Effi y le preguntó:

—¿Cómo estás, Effi? Roswitha dice que tienes mucha fiebre.

—Bah, Roswitha se asusta enseguida. He visto en su cara que piensa que voy a morirme. En fin, no lo sé. Pero ella se imagina que todos tenemos que espantarnos ante la muerte tanto como ella.

—¿Estás tranquila ante la idea de morir, querida Effi?

—Muy tranquila, mamá.

—¿No te estás engañando, hija? Todo el mundo se aferra a la vida, sobre todo los jóvenes. Y tú eres tan joven todavía…

Effi guardó silencio durante un instante y luego dijo:

—Ya sabes que no he leído mucho. Innstetten se extrañaba a menudo de ello y no le parecía bien.

Era la primera vez que pronunciaba el nombre de Innstetten, lo cual impresionó mucho a su madre y le hizo comprender que aquello era el fin.

—Creo que querías contarme algo —dijo la señora Von Briest.

—Así es. Has dicho que todavía era muy joven, y está claro que aún lo soy, pero eso no importa. En aquellos días felices, Innstetten solía leerme por las noches; tenía libros muy buenos, y recuerdo que en uno de ellos se hablaba de alguien al que llamaron mientras estaba cenando y tuvo que ausentarse cuando todos estaban muy animados a la mesa. Al día siguiente preguntó qué había pasado después y le respondieron: «Oh, hubo de todo, pero en realidad no se perdió gran cosa». Mira, mamá, esas palabras se me quedaron grabadas: no debes de perderte gran cosa cuando te llaman y tienes que levantarte de la mesa antes de hora.

La señora Von Briest guardó silencio. Effi se incorporó un poco y dijo:

—Y ya que he hablado de los viejos tiempos y de Innstetten, tengo que decirte algo más, querida mamá.

—No te excites, Effi.

—No, no; sacar algo que guardo en el fondo del alma no me altera, sino que me tranquiliza. Lo que quería decirte es que muero reconciliada con Dios y con los hombres, y también con él.

—¿Es que guardabas en tu corazón tanta amargura contra él? Porque, y perdóname que te diga esto ahora, querida Effi, en realidad fuiste tú la causante de vuestra desdicha.

Effi asintió.

—Sí, mamá, y es muy triste que sea así. Pero cuando ocurrió aquello tan espantoso, y acabó con aquel triste asunto de Annie, ya sabes a qué me refiero… bueno, entonces, si me permites emplear esta ridícula expresión, se me cambiaron por completo las tornas y me convencí de que el culpable era él, porque había

actuado de forma desapasionada, calculadora y cruel. Y de mi boca no salieron más que maldiciones contra él.

—¿Y ahora te arrepientes?

—Sí. Y quiero que él sepa que, durante mis días de enfermedad, que tal vez hayan sido los más hermosos de mi vida, he comprendido claramente que actuó bien. Que hizo lo que tenía que hacer. En todo aquel incidente con el pobre Crampas… ¿qué otra cosa podría haber hecho? Y después, en lo que más profundamente me dolió, educar a mi propia hija para que me rechazase, he de reconocer, por muy duro que sea y por mucho que me duela, que también tenía razón. Hazle saber que he muerto con esta convicción. Eso le consolará, le confortará, tal vez le reconciliará. Porque en su naturaleza tenía mucho de bueno, y era tan noble como cualquiera que carezca de la capacidad real de amar.

La señora Von Briest advirtió que Effi estaba extenuada y parecía que quería dormir. Se levantó sin hacer ruido y la dejó sola. Sin embargo, en cuanto salió de la habitación, Effi también se levantó y se sentó junto a la ventana abierta para aspirar una vez más el aire fresco de la noche. Las estrellas centelleaban y en el parque no se movía ni una hoja. Pero, cuanto más escuchaba, más claramente volvía a sentir un murmullo como de llovizna entre los plátanos. La embargó un sentimiento de liberación.

—Paz, paz.

Había transcurrido un mes y septiembre ya languidecía. Hacía buen tiempo, pero en la vegetación del parque se veían numerosas pinceladas rojizas y amarillentas, y desde el equinoccio, que había traído consigo tres días de tormentas, había hojas esparcidas por doquier. En la rotonda se había producido una leve modificación: el reloj de sol ya no estaba, y su lugar lo ocupaba desde el día anterior una lápida blanca de mármol, con una simple inscripción que decía: «Effi Briest», y debajo una cruz. Había sido el último deseo de Effi: «En mi lápida me gustaría volver a tener mi antiguo nombre. No he hecho honor al otro». Y sus padres se lo prometieron.

Sí, el día anterior había llegado la losa de mármol y había sido colocada en su sitio, y ahora Briest y su esposa estaban de nuevo sentados frente a aquel lugar, contemplando el heliotropo que habían conservado y que ahora enmarcaba la lápida. Rollo estaba tumbado allí cerca, con la cabeza entre las patas.

Wilke, con sus polainas cada vez más dadas de sí, trajo el desayuno y el correo, y el viejo Briest le dijo:

—Wilke, haga que preparen el coche pequeño. Quiero salir al campo con la señora.

Entretanto, la señora Von Briest había servido el café y volvió a dirigir la mirada hacia la rotonda y su parterre de flores.

—Mira, Briest. Rollo vuelve a estar tumbado delante de la lápida. Lo ha sentido más intensamente que nosotros. Ya no come.

—Sí, Luise, ¡pobres animales! Es lo que siempre he dicho. No valemos tanto como nos pensamos. Lo atribuimos al simple instinto, pero a fin de cuentas es siempre lo mejor y más puro.

—No digas esas cosas. Cuando te pones a filosofar… No me lo tomes a mal, Briest, pero no es lo tuyo. Tienes mucho sentido común, pero en cuestiones como estas…

—No doy la talla.

—Y si se trata de plantearse alguna cuestión, creo que hay otras que son más importantes. Y puedo decirte, Briest, que no ha pasado un solo día desde que nuestra pobre hija está enterrada ahí en que no me haya hecho esas preguntas…

—¿Qué preguntas?

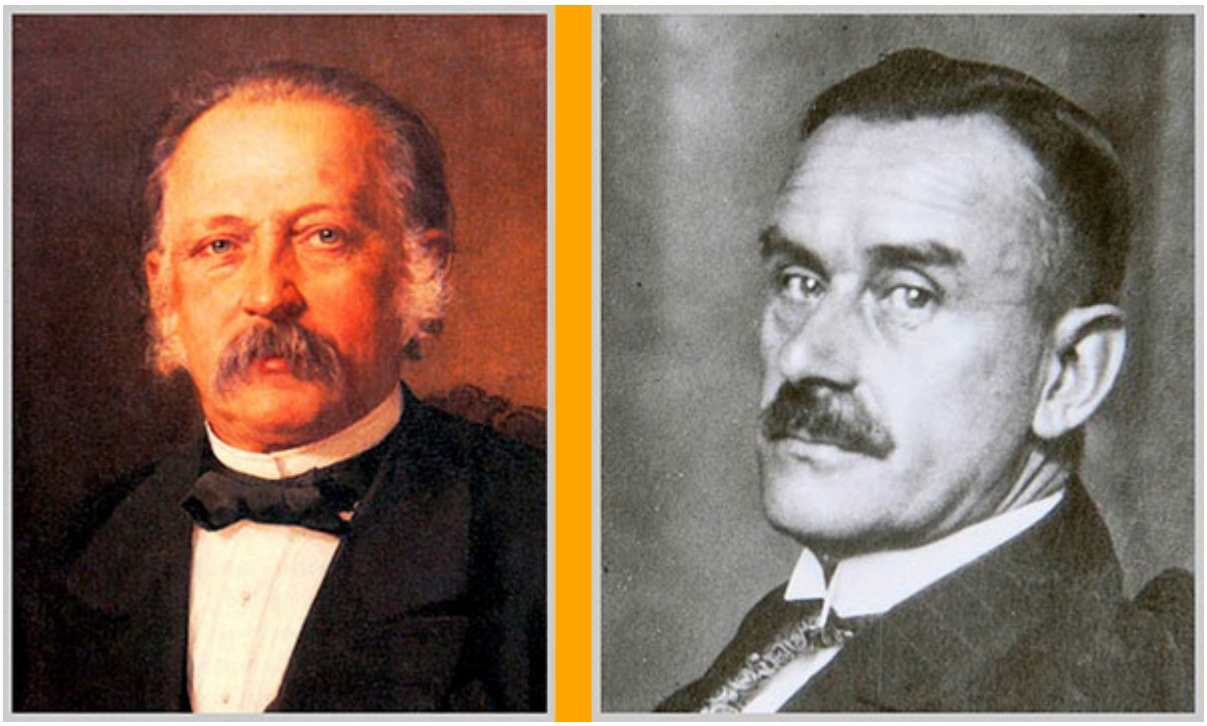
—¿No habremos tenido nosotros la culpa?

—¡Qué disparate, Luise! ¿Qué quieres decir con eso?

—Si no tendríamos que haberla educado de forma más estricta. Y digo nosotros, porque Niemeyer es realmente una nulidad, y todo lo deja abierto a la duda. Y tú, Briest, me sabe mal decírtelo… con tus continuas ambigüedades y salidas de tono… Y finalmente yo misma, que no pretendo salir absuelta de todo esto… ¿No la casamos demasiado joven?

Rollo, que al oír estas palabras se había despertado, movió lentamente la cabeza de lado a lado, y el viejo Briest repuso con mucha calma:

—Ah, Luise, déjalo estar… Eso sería el cuento de nunca acabar.



THEODOR FONTANE (Neuruppin, 30 de diciembre de 1819-Berlín, 20 de septiembre de 1898) fue un novelista y poeta alemán, considerado el principal exponente del realismo literario en Alemania.

Los padres del autor eran de origen hugonote, comunidad industriosa llegada de Francia, que llegó a ser casi un cuarto de la población berlinesa.

Fontane era uno de los hijos del farmacéutico Louis Henri Fontane, que se casó en 1819 con Emilie Labry. Vivió hasta los siete años en su ciudad natal de Neuruppin; en ese momento la familia se mudó a Swinemünde, puerto del Báltico, debido a que el padre tuvo que vender su farmacia para pagar deudas de juego. Esa estancia grata en Neuruppin (además, fue educado en familia) la describirá en parte de su autobiografía: *Meine Kinderjahre*.

Entre 1832 y 1833, Fontane estudió en la escuela secundaria *Friedrich-Wilhelm* de Neuruppin, y pasó luego a una escuela de formación profesional en Berlín, donde se hospedó con un tío. En 1835 conoció a la que sería su novia diez años más tarde, Emilie Rouanet-Kummer, y la ciudad se convertirá en su segundo lugar de referencia.

En 1836 interrumpió sus estudios en dicha escuela, para trabajar como aprendiz de Farmacia. En 1839 publicó su primer texto, «Geschwisterliebe» («Amor Fraternal»), y ese mismo año terminó su carrera como farmacéutico. En 1840 obtuvo un puesto como ayudante de farmacia en Burg cerca de Magdeburgo y empezó a escribir sus primeros poemas. En 1841 enfermó de fiebre tifoidea. Después de recuperarse en la casa de sus padres en Letschin, trabajó como ayudante de farmacia en Leipzig y Dresde, para finalmente trabajar en la farmacia de su padre en Letschin.

En 1843 fue introducido en el club literario berlinés «Tunnel über der Spree» del que pasó a ser miembro regular al año siguiente. En este club tuvo contacto con los más importantes intelectuales berlineses de su tiempo. En 1845 tras un año de servicio militar voluntario, emprendió un viaje de 14 días por Inglaterra invitado por un compañero de escuela. Al regresar, trabajó una vez más con su padre en Letschin, pero regresó a Berlín definitivamente para trabajar en la «Farmacia Polaca» del Dr. Julius Eduard Schacht. El 8 de diciembre de 1845 se comprometió con su novia. Y en marzo de 1847 obtuvo su licencia de «Farmacéutico de Primer Grado».

Al año siguiente, Fontane luchó como revolucionario en las «barricadas» de Berlín en marzo de 1848, lo que supone un giro en su vida. A continuación, publicó cuatro textos radicales en el *Berliner Zeitungs-Halle* el órgano oficial de un partido demócrata.

El 30 de septiembre de 1849 decidió abandonar definitivamente la profesión de farmacéutico y trabajar ya como escritor independiente. En un principio escribió textos políticos para el periódico demócrata-radical

Dresdner Zeitung, hasta el año siguiente. En 1850 se casó con su prometida, Emilie Rouanet-Kummer. La pareja tuvo problemas financieros por lo que Fontane aceptó trabajar para la *Centralstelle für Preßangelegenheiten* (Oficina para Asuntos de Prensa), parte de los servicios de inteligencia prusianos, que se dedicaba a promover una agenda de nacionalismo pan-germánico en la prensa de los distintos reinos y territorios alemanes.

Para este organismo hizo un viaje a Londres en 1852 donde luego vivió como corresponsal entre 1855 y 1859. Profundiza en la historia y en la política, lo que supone una verdadera evolución mental.

Esperando ahora un aumento de libertades con el cambio en el trono de Prusia, renunció a su puesto de corresponsal y regresó a Berlín. Al no poder encontrar un puesto de trabajo, se dedicó a la literatura de viajes, que por aquel entonces tenía gran popularidad, pues pocos se podían dar el lujo de un viaje.

THOMAS MANN (1875-1955), genial ensayista y narrador, publicó su primera novela, *Los Buddenbrook*, con solo veinticinco años. Con ella obtuvo un reconocimiento inmediato que se vio refrendado con la publicación de obras maestras como *La muerte en Venecia* (1912), *La montaña mágica* (1924), el ciclo *José y sus hermanos*
(1933-1943)
o *Doctor Faustus* (1947). En 1929 la Academia Sueca le concedió el Premio Nobel de Literatura.